PATH OF ASSIMILATION: A COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND THAINESS IN HIGHLAND AND LOWLAND THAILAND (1945-1980)

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates how ethnic identity was lived, negotiated, and transformed in mid-20th-century Thailand, focusing on both lowland and highland communities. Drawing on fieldwork notes, photographs, archival documents, and government records, it examines how groups such as the Phu Thai, Karen, Lua, and Hmong navigated the Thai state's push for national unity. Education, religious rituals, and everyday social practices emerge as sites where state ambitions and local creativity intersected, revealing how Thainess was taught, performed, and sometimes resisted.

By exploring the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and governance, this study shows that identity was neither fixed nor imposed unilaterally. Ceremonies, schools, and village life became arenas in which communities negotiated their place in the nation, blending tradition with new expectations. From rockets signaling the arrival of rain to monk ordinations and royal celebrations, these moments illuminate the subtle, often intimate ways people engaged with state power while preserving distinct cultural worlds.

This research reframes Thai nation-building as a dynamic negotiation rather than a one-way process. It demonstrates that national identity was made as much in local villages and borderlands as in Bangkok's bureaucracies, and that the persistence of ethnic knowledge and practice was central to shaping modern Thailand. By centering lived experience, this dissertation highlights how belonging, adaptation, and cultural memory shaped the contours of the Thai nation, offering a more textured understanding of ethnicity, power, and modernity in Southeast Asia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation exists because Tracy Barrett believed in it long before I believed I could finish it. She pushed me when I hesitated and challenged me when I grew comfortable. Her guidance was not only intellectual but deeply human; she knew when to demand more and when to give space. Without her insistence, patience, and faith in my ability to see this project through, I would never have attempted to complete this dissertation. I am equally grateful to the History Department at North Dakota State University, whose faculty and staff provided the academic home that allowed this work to grow. Their support, mentorship, and institutional care made it possible for me to pursue difficult questions, sit with uncertainty, and emerge as a historian committed to telling histories that are often overlooked.

I owe an immense debt to the University of Washington Libraries and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, particularly for the Luce Fellowship that granted me access to the field notes of the late Charles F. Keyes. Although I never met him, spending long days with his notes, photographs, and reflections created a sense of quiet companionship. Through his work, I felt guided by a scholar who cared deeply about the people he wrote about, and whose humility and attentiveness continue to shape my own approach to research. I am grateful to the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Washington not only for material support, but for the intellectual relationships it fostered—especially my meeting with Prasit Leepreecha of Chiang Mai University, whose scholarship and conversations profoundly changed how I understand the othering of highland minorities in Thailand. I also thank Judith Henchy of the University of Washington Libraries, with whom I had the privilege of working in the Southeast Asian Collections. Her generosity, precision, and care for the archive taught me what ethical stewardship of history looks like in practice.

I am deeply thankful to the institutions that preserved the materials that made this dissertation possible: the National Archives of Thailand, the Provincial National Archives of Thailand, and the Southeast Asian Collections at University of Washington and Cornell University. Beyond institutions, I owe everything to the people who sustained me personally through this long and often isolating journey. Connor McWhinney offered steadiness, humor, and companionship when I needed it most. My parents—Amond Neuville, Yuwadi Neuville, and my late father, Patuan Jampee—carried me through this work with their love, sacrifices, and unwavering belief that finishing mattered, even when the end felt impossibly far away. I carry with me, always, the memory of my grandparents—Thanorm Phupanasang, Narng Phupanasang, Boonlert Jampee, and Somjit Jampee. Though they are no longer here, their lives, stories, and teachings live on in this work. Their histories shaped my curiosity, their lessons sustained my discipline, and their legacies gave me the courage to continue on the path of scholarship.

Finally, I thank the Phu Thai, Tai Lue, Karen, Hmong, and Lua communities who welcomed me into their homes, their villages, their lives, and their histories. Many saw me not only as a researcher, but as kin—sometimes despite the fact that we shared little beyond a national identity. Their generosity, openness, and trust transformed this project from an academic exercise into a moral responsibility. They reminded me that history is not abstract; it is lived, remembered, and entrusted to those willing to listen. Whatever value this dissertation holds comes from their kindness, their stories, and the faith they placed in me to carry them forward with care.

PREFACE: THAI LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

This dissertation follows the "General System of Phonetic Transcription of Thai Characters into Roman", devised by the Royal Institute, Bangkok, in 1954, for the transliteration of Thai-language terms into the Roman alphabet. This system has been adopted to ensure consistency, clarity, and scholarly standardization throughout the text, particularly when rendering Thai place names, institutional terms, and vernacular concepts that do not have widely accepted English equivalents.

Exceptions to this system are made for historically established and widely recognized names whose conventional English spellings differ from Royal Institute transliteration. These include the names of Thai monarchs, such as Mongkut (Rama IV), Chulalongkorn (Rama V), and Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), as well as commonly used regional and historical terms, including Isan, Lanna, Lan Xang, and Nanburi. Retaining these conventional spellings reflects established usage in English-language scholarship and avoids unnecessary confusion for readers familiar with the existing historiography.

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INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING THAINESS: GEOGRAPHY, ETHNIC DIFFERENCE, AND PATHS OF ASSIMILATION IN MODERN THAILAND

The history of Thailand is often presented as a linear progression from ancient kingdoms to a modern nation-state. Dominated by the narratives of central lowland Thais, this version of history tends to overlook the diverse ethnic groups that have long inhabited the region. As a result, ethnic minorities are frequently sidelined or completely forgotten in mainstream historical studies of Thailand. This research explores the history of Thailand and the state's intricate processes of assimilation and identity formation by examining how ethnic minorities and Indochinese refugees in Northern and Northeastern Thailand navigated assimilation pressures between 1945 and 1980. The study focuses on the contrasting experiences of highland and lowland communities, whose geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts created divergent paths of integration into the Thai state. While lowland ethnic minorities were more readily integrated due to cultural and geographic proximity to state power in Bangkok, highland communities resisted assimilation or were excluded from similar efforts, revealing the uneven nature of Thailand's nation-building project.

The historical and ongoing struggles of Thailand's borderland and ethnic minority communities reveal the profound complexities of ethnic identity, marginalization, and the challenges of integration and assimilation. These events are not isolated disruptions; they are part of a larger narrative that has shaped Thailand's post-WWII history. Between 1945 and 1980, as Thailand worked to consolidate itself as a modern nation-state, the government faced significant challenges in unifying a population marked by remarkable ethnic diversity. This task was further complicated by geopolitical pressures, including the rise of communism, the Cold War, and the fallout from the Indochina conflicts. In this context, assimilation policies became a central tool

for creating national identity and security. Yet, as the experiences of highland and lowland communities demonstrate, these policies were far from uniform or universally successful.

Uneven Path of Thainess

This dissertation shows that the uneven paths of assimilation in Thailand between 1945 and 1980 reveal not only the mechanics of state-building but also the fragility of national identity itself. Thaification, long described in official narratives as a success story of unity, was in reality a patchwork of accommodations, resistances, and contradictions. In the lowlands, assimilation appeared smooth: schools taught the Thai language, temples reinforced Buddhist morality, and royal projects connected villages to the state. Yet in the highlands, where distance, ecology, and cultural difference set communities apart, the same institutions struggled, leaving groups like the Hmong and Karen stigmatized as outsiders. This unevenness is not a peripheral detail; it is the very heart of Thailand's nation-building story. As Thongchai Winichakul has argued, national identity is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion, a truth that Thailand's highland-lowland divide makes unmistakably clear.[1]

The central contribution of this study is to show that Thai-ness during these decades was not a finished product or a top-down achievement, but a contested and negotiated process. Lowland groups such as the Isan Lao or Phu Thai did not simply abandon their heritage; they blended local traditions with the state's symbols, weaving animism into Buddhism or incorporating Isan textiles into national culture.[2] Highland groups, while often pressured to conform, retained their languages, rituals, and clan structures, adopting only those elements of

[1] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 17–21

[2] Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 123–28.

Thainess that made sense for survival. These everyday acts of adaptation remind us that assimilation was never simply imposed—it was lived, contested, and redefined in households, villages, and borderlands.

Understanding the historical roots of these processes requires examining how geography, historical trajectories, and cultural boundaries shaped assimilation outcomes. It also necessitates exploring how ethnic minorities and refugees negotiated these pressures, often resisting or adapting to the state's attempts to define their identities. This backdrop brings into focus the research problem and significance of this study, as this research focuses on the differential experiences of lowland ethnic minorities in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, such has the Thai Isan, Khon Muang, and the Phu Thai, and highland communities like the Karen, Hmong, and Lua.

Assimilation Without Uniformity

In sociological discourse, assimilation refers to the process by which individuals or groups from different backgrounds adopt the cultural norms of another group, leading to a reduction in cultural distinctions. This often involves minorities adopting the language, customs, and values of the dominant society, sometimes at the expense of their original cultural identities. The process of assimilation has historically been driven by economic, political, and social pressures, often reflecting the dominant group's desire for cultural uniformity. It can be voluntary, as individuals seek to access opportunities within the mainstream society, or coercive, as state policies enforce cultural conformity through education, language mandates, and legal frameworks. Sociologists Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess characterize assimilation as a process where "persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups, and by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a

common cultural life."[3] This view suggests the depth of cultural absorption that assimilation entails, often requiring the erasure of ethnic distinctions in favor of a singular national identity.

Integration, on the other hand, involves the incorporation of individuals or groups into the social structures of the host society while allowing the preservation of distinct cultural identities. This concept emphasizes mutual adaptation and the coexistence of diverse cultures within a unified social framework. Unlike assimilation, which demands a relinquishment of cultural uniqueness, integration fosters inclusivity by recognizing the value of pluralism within a nation-state. Integration seeks to promote social cohesion by encouraging participation in the broader society without necessitating the abandonment of one's cultural heritage. It operates on the principle that a society can be unified without requiring homogeneity. Émile Durkheim's work on social integration highlighted the importance of shared values and norms in maintaining societal cohesion, suggesting that a collective consciousness is essential for social stability.[4] However, integration is not always free from challenges; it requires a delicate balance between national unity and cultural autonomy, where dominant and minority groups negotiate space within a shared identity.

In this research, the term lowland and highland are used to distinguish the geographic and cultural landscapes that shaped Thailand's assimilation policies. The lower lowland refers to the Central Thai heartland anchored around the Chao Phraya River Basin and extending to the Southern regions of the country, areas fully integrated into the Thai nation-state and thoroughly

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[3] Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), 735.

[4] Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1997), 24-25.

Thaified through language, Buddhism, and royal influence.[5] The upper lowland encompasses the Northeastern region, known as Isan or the Korat Plateau. This area has historically been inhabited by the majority Lao-speaking populations, as well as the valley cities (*muang* or *wiang*) of the Northern Lanna Kingdom, where distinct regional identities persisted despite gradual incorporation into the Thai state. In contrast, the highland designates the rugged mountainous zones along Thailand's northern and western borders, home to diverse ethnic groups collectively labeled as "hill tribes." Among these highland groups are the Karen, Hmong, and Akha, whose relative geographic isolation has historically limited state influence and allowed the preservation of distinct cultural identity. For clarity, this study will refer to the lower lowland as "Central Thai," the upper lowland simply as "lowland," and the mountainous regions as "highland" throughout the analysis.[6]

In the context of Thailand, the processes of assimilation and integration have been central to the nation's approach to its diverse ethnic and religious minorities. The concept of Thaification describes efforts to assimilate various cultural groups into the dominant Central Thai culture, often at the expense of regional identities. This process has been particularly evident among the Lao speaking people in the northeastern Isan region, the so-called "hill tribes"

[5] This study does not include the Muslim-majority southern provinces of Thailand, which fall outside the scope of this research. For further discussion on Thaification and the construction of Thainess among Southern Thai Muslim populations, see Michel Gilquin, *The Muslims of Thailand*, trans. Michael Smithies (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005); Jacques Ivanoff, *The Cultural Roots of Violence in Malay Southern Thailand: Comparative Mythology*; *Soul of Rice* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007); Umaiyah Haji Umar, *The Assimilation of Bangkok-Melayu Communities in the Bangkok Metropolis and Surrounding Areas* (Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2001).

[6] Refer to Map 1 for a topographic representation of Thailand's terrain.

in the Northern highland, and the Muslim Malays in the South. Thaification policies have historically sought to cement allegiance to the centralized Thai state, reenforcing a singular vision of national identity. Integration approaches have sought to incorporate regional identities into the national narrative, allowing for coexistence within a unified framework. Unsurprisingly, integration in the Thai context has often been asymmetrical, favoring selective cultural inclusivity while maintaining a hierarchy that privileges the Central Thai identity. Despite these conceptual differences, both processes have ultimately aimed to incorporate diverse groups into the national fabric, reflecting a complex interplay between unity and diversity in Thailand's Thaification efforts in the post-WWII era.

Understanding these dynamics is critical to grasping the broader implications of national identity formation in Thailand and Southeast Asia. The persistence of state-led efforts to shape identity through assimilation and integration reveal the underlying anxieties about national unity, border security, and ethnic autonomy in the 21st century. By examining how these processes unfolded between 1945 and 1980, this research sheds light on the long-term effects of state intervention in cultural identity, contributing to contemporary discussions on minority rights, citizenship, and the politics of belonging. The case of Thailand offers valuable insights into the mechanisms of cultural inclusion and exclusion, demonstrating how nation-states across Southeast Asia continue to grapple with the challenge of maintaining unity in diversity.

This monograph opens with an examination of how geography – particular the contrast between lowland and highland regions – influenced the state's assimilation policies and outcomes. Chapter 1 focuses first on lowlands, demonstrating their historical position as the nucleus of Thai national identity due to their fertile plains, accessibility, and deep cultural ties to the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms. These regions facilitated the spread of state institutions

such as education, Buddhism, and royal development projects, which helped align local populations with Central Thai norms and strengthen a unified Thai identity. At the same time, Chapter 1 also examines the highlands, where rugged terrain and relative isolation allowed groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Lua to preserve distinct cultural identities while being dominated by lowland policies. The Thai state's efforts to assimilate these highland groups were often fragmented and contested, with development and re-education programs clashing frequently with entrenched local customs and ecological practices. In short, Chapter 1 shows how geographical conditions not only shaped state strategies but also conditioned the responses and resilience of ethnic communities.

The bulk of this monograph explores how specific state institutions – education, religion, the monarchy, and material culture – were deployed as tools of assimilation and how their impacts varied across regions. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address this question in detail. Chapter 2 examines the role of education, particularly the 1960 National Education Plan, in promoting Thai language, Buddhist morality, and the loyalty to the monarchy. While education was effective in lowland regions, it met resistance in the highlands where local identities and traditions clashed with centralized curricula. Chapter 3 investigates Buddhism's dual role as both a bridge and a boundary. For groups like the Phu Thai in Thailand's lowland Northeast, Buddhism facilitated integration, not as a wholesale abandonment of local beliefs but as a flexible framework that could accommodate spirits, rituals, and everyday moral life. However, in the highlands, where animist and Christian practices remained deeply embedded in community structures and landscapes, Buddhist missionary efforts often stopped at the village edge, revealing the limits of religion as a universal tool of assimilation. Chapter 4 evaluates the monarchy's influence, focusing on King Bhumibol Adulyadej's development projects and symbolic role in unifying the

nation. The monarchy was particularly successful in lowland areas but less so in highland regions where royal initiatives struggled to overcome cultural and physical barriers. Chapter 4 also analyzes the role of textiles and material culture, highlighting how the state celebrated lowland weaving traditions—particularly from Isan—as symbols of Thai identity, while highland textiles were exoticized but remained peripheral. Together, these chapters demonstrate that while institutions were central to Thaification, their reach and effectiveness were uneven and shaped by local contexts.

The ultimate goal of this dissertation is to explore some of the ways that ethnic minorities and refugees actively negotiated, resisted, or adapted to state-imposed assimilation policies. Far from being passive subjects, these communities demonstrated significant agency. Some groups adopted Thai identity markers to access education, economic mobility, and social security, while others maintained linguistic, religious, and cultural practices that preserved their distinctiveness.

In sum, this dissertation provides a comparative historical analysis of the complex, uneven processes of assimilation in mid-20th century Thailand. It concludes that while lowland populations were more fully integrated into Thainess, highland groups and refugees experienced selective or contested inclusion. Geography, institutional power, and local agency collectively shaped the diverse path toward national identity, revealing the persistent tension between the Thai state's homogenizing goals and the rich ethnic diversity of Northern and Northeastern Thailand.

Maps and Geo-Bodies of the State

As is true for all works of historical scholarship, my work draws heavily from the scholars who came before me. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" provides a crucial framework for this study. Anderson argues that nations are not natural entities

but socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and institutions.[7] In Thailand, the construction of a cohesive national identity was achieved through cultural markers like Buddhism, the monarchy, and centralized education, which helped to "imagine" a unified Thai nation. However, this framework also highlights the inherent tensions within this process, particularly for communities whose ethnic, linguistic, or geographic identities did not align with the state's vision of Thainess. Anderson's work suggests how the Thai state sought to reconcile these differences within its broader Thainess project.

Expanding on Anderson's framework, Thai scholars have critically examined how the state's imagination of a unified Thai nation has both shaped and strained relationships with its diverse populations. Chaiwat Satha-Anand's research on the Deep South highlights how Thailand's Muslim populations have long been positioned outside the imagined Thai community. Through state narratives that privilege Buddhism and monarchy, the Malay-Muslim identity is

[7] Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, introduced in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, refers to the way nations are socially constructed entities, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a collective whole. Anderson argues that a nation is "imagined" because the vast majority of its members will never meet or interact with one another, yet they maintain a shared sense of belonging and unity. This shared identity is fostered through symbolic means such as language, print media, education, and shared rituals, which create a sense of common history and destiny. Anderson emphasizes that this community is imagined as both inherently limited, because it exists within defined territorial borders, and sovereign, as it replaces older hierarchical forms of governance with the modern idea of the nation-state. Importantly, it is not the falseness of this "imagining" that Anderson critiques, but its powerful role in shaping political and cultural identities. The concept illuminates how nationalism operates not as a natural or eternal phenomenon, but as a product of historical and cultural forces that emerged with the advent of print capitalism and modernity. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

framed as a national security concern rather than a legitimate cultural component of the nation.[8] Kasian Tejapira further demonstrates how Thailand's education system has functioned as a vehicle of state ideology, reinforcing national myths and homogenizing histories that sideline minority voices.[9] Together, these scholars reveal that the imagined Thai nation is not an inclusive space but a contested arena where state-led efforts to foster unity have often amplified the very divisions they sought to erase.

Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* adds a special and cartographic dimension to this research. Thongchai's work demonstrates how mapping and the delineation of territorial boundaries were instrumental to defining Thailand as a modern nation-state.[10] This work demonstrates how the Thai state used geographical constructs to integrate peripheral regions, such as Thailand's highland and lowland ethnicities, into the national framework. By redefining borders and asserting sovereignty over previously fluid and contested spaces, the Siamese state reinforced a centralized vision of Thainess, which was essential to nation-building efforts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For highland communities such as the Karen and Hmong, this process of mapping and territorialization

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[8] Chaiwat Satha-Anand, *The Silence of the Bullet Monument: Violence and "Truth" Management, and the Body in Thailand* (Bangkok: Kobfai Publishing Project, 2006).

[9] Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927–1958* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2001).

[10] Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* provides critical insights into how the concept of the "geo-body" of Thailand was constructed through cartographic and political processes, fundamentally shaping the country's understanding of its territorial sovereignty and national identity. Thongchai's analysis of mapping as a tool of nationalism provides a critical theoretical framework for understanding the intersection of geography, ethnicity, and assimilation in Thailand's highland and lowland regions during the twentieth century. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*.

marginalized their identities and practices, placing them at odds with the state's assimilationist policies. Similarly, for lowland groups like the Lao-speaking Isan people, the state's assertion of territorial unity through cartographic nationalism served as a foundation for Thaification, which sought to erase regional and ethnic distinctions in favor of a homogenized national identity. Beyond external borders, internal spatial hierarchies, such as the distinction between highlands and lowlands in this research, played a critical role in shaping state policies toward ethnic minorities. In this context, mapping was not just a geographic exercise but a political act, used to classify and control populations. Thongchai's insights are essential to understanding how geographic imaginaries influenced the assimilation strategies employed by the Thai state and how these policies varied across regions.

Further expanding on Thongchai's argument, Shane Strate's examination of cartography and territorial loss in The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation deepens our understanding of how mapping functioned not only as a spatial but also as a psychological tool in Thaification. Strate demonstrates that the Thai state's obsession with lost territories—lands ceded during colonial-era border negotiations—became central to shaping national identity and justifying assimilation policies.[11] This narrative of national humiliation reinforced the state's imperative to strengthen control over peripheral regions and populations, particularly those seen as ethnically or geographically distinct, such as highland minorities. By framing these territories and their inhabitants as vulnerable frontiers, the state legitimized programs of integration and surveillance aimed at consolidating Thai identity. Complementing this perspective, Patrick Jory's analysis of Strate's work underscores how these historical anxieties over space and sovereignty

[11] Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

continue to influence modern state policies and the cultural politics of belonging.[12] Together, these scholars highlight the enduring power of geographic imaginaries—both lost and mapped—in shaping Thailand's assimilation strategies and the contested spaces occupied by ethnic minorities.

Charles F. Keyes' theories on ethnicity and the construction of national identity in Southeast Asia provide a critical anthropological perspective. Keyes argues that ethnicity in Thailand has historically been fluid, shaped by the interplay of local traditions, state politics, and regional influences.[13] Keyes' work emphasizes how the Thai state constructed Thainess by appropriating lowland cultural markers, such as Buddhism and Thai language, while marginalizing the practices of highland and minority communities. Keyes' analysis of ethnic boundaries and their negotiation highlights the agency of ethnic minorities, who adapted to or resisted assimilation efforts in ways that reflected their unique cultural contexts.[14] His emphasis on the role of religion and education in creating a unified national identity is particularly relevant for this research, as it intersects with the state's use of Buddhism to integrate diverse populations.

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[12] Patrick Jory, review of *The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation* by Shane Strate, Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History 17, no. 1 (Spring 2016).

[13] Charles F. Keyes, "Who Are the Tai? Reflections on the Invention of Local, Ethnic and National Identities," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, eds. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 35–67.

[14] Charles F. Keyes, "The Peoples of Asia: Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam," *Journal of the Siam Society* 92, no. 1 (2004): 1–22.

Building on Keyes' framework, Thai and western scholars further illustrate how ethnic identity in Thailand remains a dynamic negotiation between state power and minority agency. For instance, the research of Prasit Leepreecha, an anthropologist of Hmong decent, on the Hmong community in Northern Thailand highlights how highland groups have navigated state assimilation pressures by adapting cultural practices while retaining distinct ethnic identities. His work underscores the resilience of marginalized communities in the face of policies designed to integrate them into the national fold through education, development projects, and religious conversion.[15] Similarly, geographer and anthropologist Ian G. Baird's analysis of ethnic groups in Northern Thailand explores how local populations engage with transnational discourses of indigeneity, using global frameworks to assert claims of belonging within the Thai state. Baird reveals the complex interplay between external influences and local identities, particularly among groups historically viewed as peripheral to the Thai nation.[16] Meanwhile, political scientist Jacob I. Ricks' study of the Isan people provides critical insight into how lowland minorities, though linguistically and culturally distinct, have been successfully integrated into Thai national identity.[17] Ricks demonstrates that while regional identities persist, the Isan population has internalized notions of Thainess, reflecting the long-term impacts of state-led assimilation strategies. Together, these scholars reinforce Keyes' argument that ethnic identity in

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[15] Prasit Leepreecha, "The Politics of Ethnic Categorization in Thailand's Highland" in *Living with Diversity: Comparative Perspectives on Ethnic Minorities in Southeast Asia*, eds. Benjamin Bade and Willem van Schendel (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012), 133–158.

[16] Ian G. Baird, "Who Should be Considered 'Indigenous'? A Survey of Ethnic Groups in Northern Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity* 14, no. 3 (2013): 285–305.

[17] Jacob I. Ricks, "Pride and Prejudice: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Thai Nation-Building," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 23, no. 2 (2017): 206–221.

Thailand is fluid and contested, shaped by both state-driven narratives and the lived experiences of diverse ethnic communities striving to maintain their heritage within a framework of national unity

David K. Wyatt's analysis of modern Thailand provides a critical framework for understanding the socio-political and institutional transformations behind Thaification. He emphasizes how education, legal reforms, and bureaucratic centralization shaped a modern Thai state and reinforced Central Thai cultural dominance.[18] Wyatt's insights contextualize the challenges ethnic minorities and refugees faced as their integration was shaped by these state-building strategies, highlighting the uneven outcomes of assimilation in Northern and Northeastern Thailand.

Building upon Wyatt's analysis, Thai scholars have similarly emphasized the central role of state-led reforms and institutional development in shaping the nation's modern identity. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, often regarded as the father of Thai history and the architect of administrative modernization, was instrumental in implementing the *thesaphiban* system, which dismantled local autonomy and brought the northern and northeastern regions more firmly under Bangkok's central control. Prince Damron's efforts in education, provincial administration, and historical narrative construction laid a foundation for the state's assimilation strategies that persisted throughout the 20th century.[19] Expanding on Prince Damron's legacy, historian Tej

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[18] David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

[19] Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Our Wars with the Burmese: Thai-Burmese Conflict 1539–1767*, trans. Sulak Sivaraksa (Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 2001); Somdet Phra Phaya Damrong Rachanuphap, *Nangsu Prawattisat Sayam* [The History of Siam] (Phra Nakhon: Sophon Phiphattanakon Printing House, 1914 [2457 BE])

Bunnag's seminal study of the Ministry of Interior under Prince Damrong details how these bureaucratic reforms redefined the relationship between the center and the periphery, fundamentally altering local governance structures in ways that facilitated the imposition of Central Thai norms.[20] Meanwhile, Charnvit Kasetsiri highlights the intellectual and historical dimensions of these transformations, how the crafting of Thai national history, particularly during the post-Chulalongkorn era, served as a tool to reinforce notions of unity and cultural homogeneity. Building on King Chulalongkorn's administrative centralization and social reforms, his successors intensified efforts to forge a cohesive national identity. King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in particular promoted the ideology of "Nation, Religion, King" (chat, satsana, phra maha kasat), embedding loyalty to the monarchy and Theravada Buddhism as the moral pillars of Siamese citizenship. Education reforms standardized the Thai language, while state ceremonies and royal rituals projected narratives of shared belonging that sought to subsume regional and ethnic differences into a single framework of Thainess. These post-Chulalongkorn efforts transformed earlier modernization projects into explicit tools of ideological integration, consolidating the monarchy's role as the symbolic center of the nation.[21] Charnvit's analysis of state-sponsored historical narratives reveals the ways in which history itself became a mechanism of nation-building, marginalizing ethnic diversity in favor of a singular Thai identity.[22] Complementing these perspectives, Suthy Prasartset's work on economic development

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[20] Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892–1915: The Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[21] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 118–22.

[22] Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).

further illustrates how Thailand's modernization policies, especially in the post-war period, were deeply intertwined with Thai national imperatives. By promoting national economic plans that prioritized infrastructure, industry, and market integration, the state not only sought growth but also aimed to bind peripheral regions more tightly to the national core.[23] Together, these Thai scholars demonstrate that the processes Wyatt described were neither abstract nor incidental; rather, they were consciously designed and executed policies that continue to shape the contested landscapes of ethnic identity and assimilation in Northern and Northeastern Thailand.

G. William Skinner's seminal work on the Chinese Diaspora in Thailand provides the foundational framework for understanding state-led assimilation policies in Southeast Asia. In his influential study *Chinese Society in Thailand* in 1957, Skinner analyzes how the Thai state systematically integrated the large Chinese population through mechanisms such as compulsory education, the imposition of Thai surnames, economic restructuring, and social mobility pathways designed to dissolve ethnic distinctiveness. His concept of "state-directed structural assimilation" illustrates how the Thai government, particularly during the mid-20th century, transformed the Chinese from a distinct migrant community into loyal Thai citizens.[24] Skinner's research not only captures the complexity of ethnic identity formation but also highlights the central role of state power in molding national identity. This dissertation draws on Skinner's analytical model to examine how similar assimilation strategies were later applied to other ethnic

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[23] Suthy Prasartset, *The Thai Economy: Uneven Development and Internationalization* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1989).

[24] This research does not focus on the extensively studied Chinese population in the Central region, nor Chinese communities within the lowland or highland areas. For a more detailed examination of the Thaification of Chinese communities in Thailand, see: G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 263–267.

groups in Thailand – particularly the Indochinese refugees in the northeastern lowlands and groups like the Hmong and Karen highlanders. Like the Chinese before them, these groups were subject to policies that sought to integrate them economically, socially, and culturally into the Thai nation-state, though often with uneven results. By engaging Skinner's framework, this study situates Thailand's mid-20th century Thaification efforts within the broader context of Southeast Asian statecraft, where the management of ethnic diversity became a central project of modern national identity construction.

Together, these theoretical frameworks, imagined communities, mapping as statecraft, insights on ethnicity, analysis of nation building, and state led assimilation of ethnic Chinese in the central lowland, create a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the assimilation of ethnic minorities and refugees in twentieth century Thailand. They illuminate the interplay between language, culture, geography, and power, offering critical insights into how Thai state's policies succeeded in the lowland, but failed in the highland in constructing a unified national identity across diverse populations.

Building upon the thermotical frameworks outlined, this research focuses on the period of 1945 to 1980, a transformative era in Thailand's history marked by significant political, social, and geopolitical developments. This timeline captures key historical moments, including the challenges of post-war reconstruction, the height of Cold War tensions in Southeast Asia, and the Indochinese refugee crises that reshaped borderland dynamics. The study situates these events within the broader context of Thailand's efforts to consolidate its national identity and extend state control to ethnically diverse and geographically marginalized regions. This research employs a comparative analysis of Northern and Northeastern Thailand, with particular attention to the differences between highland and lowland communities. The highlands, characterized by

their geographic isolation and cultural distinctiveness, posed significant challenges to state-led assimilation efforts. In contrast, lowlands, with their relative proximity to central state authority and shared cultural practices such as Theravada Buddhism, provided more fertile ground for the state's strategies to promote Thainess. This comparative lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how geography, culture, and state policies interacted to produce divergent outcomes in the process of assimilation.

This research builds upon Anderson's imagined communities and Thongchai's mapped nation by delving deeper into how geography shaped the construction of Thai national identity and the uneven outcomes of assimilation and integration. While Anderson's theory highlights how the nation is imagined through cultural and institutional unification, and Thongchai demonstrates how the state reinforces this imagination through cartographic control, this study examines how these processes played out differently in the highland and lowland regions of Northern and Northeastern Thailand between 1945 and 1980. By focusing on the ways in which ethnic minorities were assimilated and integrated—or excluded—from this imagined nation, this research uncovers how those who lived within the mapped spaces of the state (lowlanders) were more easily assimilated into Thainess, while those outside of these mapped spaces (highlanders) remained culturally distinct, if not outright foreign. The study deepens Anderson's and Thongchai's insights by showing that national identity was not only imagined through institutions but was also geographically—those within the state's administrative and cultural reach became Thai, while those beyond its mapped influence remained outside the nation's imagined community. The physical landscape of Thailand served as an unspoken boundary of Thainess, where lowland populations were drawn into the national fold, while highland communities existed at the periphery, constantly subject to state efforts to assimilate or

marginalize them. The dissertation draws on oral histories and interviews recorded by anthropologists during these years, as well as anthropological studies of these topics. It also relies upon community initiatives to illuminate these acts of negotiations and resistance, particularly in highland areas and refugee camps. The political and legislative data from this study come from the national archives across Thailand. The insights into the lived experiences of ethnic minorities and refugees, highlighting the ways in which they negotiated, resisted, or adapted to assimilation pressures. These first-hand accounts, drawn from interviews and ethnographic studies, are particularly valuable for capturing the agency of marginalized groups whose voices are often absent from official narratives. Additionally, this study engages with a wide variety of secondary literature, including works by scholars such as Charles F. Keyes, Thongchai Winichakul, and David Wyatt, to contextualize Thailand's assimilation policies within broader regional historical trends.

This research challenges the notion of a singular, cohesive Thai identity by revealing how geography dictated who was fully included in the nation and who remained on the margins. Understanding the historical processes of assimilation and integration helps us grasp the enduring inequalities faced by ethnic minorities in Thailand today, from citizenship struggles to cultural erasure. By exposing the gaps between imagined national unity and the lived realities of marginalized communities, this study not only deepens our understanding of Thailand's past but also informs contemporary discussions on ethnic inclusion, national belonging, and state power in Southeast Asia. In a world where borders -both physical and ideological – continue to shape identities, this research offers critical insights into how nations define themselves and whose histories get recognized within that definition.

Assimilation, Integration, and Ethnic Identity

The study of assimilation, integration, and ethnic identity in Thailand from 1945 to 1980 is a multidimensional field, enriched by the contributions of both Thai and Western scholars. Their research sheds light on the complex processes by which diverse ethnic communities – lowland, highland, and migrant – were integrated into the national framework. Thai scholars have often approached these topics with a focus on the centrality of national identity and cultural unity, reflecting the state's narrative on Thaification. In contrast, Western historians and anthropologists have frequently critiqued the exclusions and tensions inherent in these processes, offering alternative frameworks that emphasize regional diversity and resistance or the lack thereof. Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of how historical forces shaped the identities and experiences of Thailand's ethnic groups during a transformative period.

Thai historiography has historically emphasized the lowlands as the cultural and political heart of the nation. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, a pivotal figure in Thai historiography, significantly shaped the narrative that positions the lowland regions, particularly the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms, as the cultural and political heart of Thailand. His works emphasized these areas as the cradle of Thai civilization, highlighting their roles in establishing Buddhist morality and monarchical stability. For instance, in his historical accounts, Prince Damrong detailed the administrative and cultural developments of Ayutthaya, portraying it as a model of governance and cultural sophistication that influenced surrounding regions. His historiographical approach often framed the history of Thailand as a continuous struggle to maintain independence, with the lowland kingdoms playing central roles in this narrative. Prince Damrong's work highlighted how these regions served as the foundation for modern Thailand, with their cultural practices and political institutions radiating outward to shape the rest of the

country.[25] While his scholarship remains influential, it has been critiqued for sidelining the contributions of peripheral regions and ethnic minorities. Prince Damrong's legacy, however, set the stage for future Thai historians who continued to prioritize the lowlands as the focal point of national identity.

Western scholars have challenged these centralizing narratives, advocating for a more inclusive approach to Thai history. David K. Wyatt, in his seminal work *Thailand: A Short History*, critiqued the notion that Thai identity was exclusively forged in the lowlands. Wyatt's meticulous research into Isan and Lanna histories revealed how these peripheral regions contributed to the cultural and political fabric of the nation. His exploration of the integration of these areas into the Thai state highlighted the tensions between regional identities and central authority prior to WWII. Wyatt also questioned the romanticized portrayal of the Sukhothai period as the golden age, suggesting that this narrative often served state-building purposes rather than reflecting historical realities.[26] Wyatt's scholarship opened the door to more critical and diverse interpretations of Thai history.

Education has been a cornerstone of national integration in Thailand, particularly during the mid-twentieth century. Scholars have explored how the Thai state utilized education to instill

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[25] Damrong Rajanubhab, *Our Wars with the Burmese: Thai-Burmese Conflict 1539–1767,* trans. U Aung Thein, ed. Chris Baker (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001). Kennon Breazeale, *The Writings of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab: A Chronology with Annotations* (Bangkok: Toyota Thailand Foundation, 1996).

[26] David K. Wyatt (1937–2006) was a distinguished American historian specializing in Thai history. His seminal work, *Thailand: A Short History*, is considered a foundational text in English on Thai history. Throughout his career, Wyatt made significant contributions to the field, including serving as president of the Association for Asian Studies in 1993. David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003). David K. Wyatt, *Studies in Thai History: Collected Articles* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994).

a sense of Thainess among its citizens, with policies emphasizing the Thai language, Buddhist values, and reverence for the monarchy. While Sombat Chantornvong's research primarily focuses on Thai politics and governance, his broader analyses of political and cultural integration provide insights into the dynamics of state policies, including education, in fostering loyalty and national unity.[27] Other scholars, such as David K. Wyatt and Gerald W. Fry, have extensively documented the implementation of educational reforms like the National Education Plan of 1960, which aimed to universalize primary education and reduce illiteracy, particularly in rural and ethnic minority communities. These works highlight the dual role of education as a unifying force and a source of cultural tension in regions where local languages and practices often clashed with state-imposed curricula.

Western anthropologists have provided critical perspectives on the limitations of these educational reforms. Charles F. Keyes, for instance, conducted extensive fieldwork among highland communities like the Karen and Lua, documenting their resistance to state imposed curricula. In his book *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*, Keyes argued that education often alienated these groups by disregarding their languages and cultural practices.[28]

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[27] Sombat Chantornvong, "Religious Literature in Thai Political Perspective: The Case of the Maha Chat Khamluang," in *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Tham Seong Chee (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981); 355–370; Sombat Chantornvong, "Local Godfathers in Thai Politics," in *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, ed. Ruth McVey (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000), 27–46.

[28] Charles F. Keyes, a distinguished American anthropologist, is renowned for his extensive research on the socio-cultural dynamics of Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand. In the 1960s, Keyes conducted pioneering fieldwork among highland ethnic minorities, such as the Karen and Lua, as well as lowland Isan communities. His work documented the impact of state-led modernization, including education programs, on these groups, highlighting tensions between local traditions and state policies. Keyes' detailed field notes and ethnographic studies serve as

He observed how many highland communities viewed these policies as an intrusion rather than a pathway to inclusion, leading to subtle forms of resistance, such as maintaining traditional oral histories and local languages alongside formal schooling. Keyes' work highlights the agency of ethnic minorities in navigating the pressures of assimilation.

Religion, particularly Theravada Buddhism, has been a key element in the Thai state's efforts to forge a unified national identity. Scholars like Pattana Kitiarsa have examined how Buddhism served as a bridge between the state and its diverse ethnic communities. His research on the Phu Thai people of the Northeastern lowlands and how their animist practices were gradually integrated into the Buddhist framework, creating a syncretic form of worship that aligned with the state's vision of Thainess. Kitiarsa argued that this blending of traditions facilitated the assimilation of lowland ethnic groups into the Thai nation, showcasing the adaptability of Buddhism as a tool of cultural integration.[29] His work suggests the roles of region not only as a spiritual practice but also as a mechanism for political and social cohesion.

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vital primary sources for understanding how ethnic communities navigated integration into the Thai nation-state during a transformative period. His monograph *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* and related works remain foundational in exploring the intersection of Thai nationalism, ethnicity, and state development. Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987); Charles F. Keyes, "The Proposed World of the School: Thai Villagers' Entry into a Bureaucratic State System," in *Reshaping Local Worlds: Formal Education and Cultural Change in Rural Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1991).

[29] Pattana Kitiarsa (1967–2013) was a renowned Thai anthropologist and scholar whose research explored the intersections of Buddhism, animism, and modernity, particularly focusing on how religious practices adapted to changing social and political contexts. His seminal works, such as *Buddhist in Public, Animist in Private* and *Beyond Syncretism*, provided groundbreaking insights into the hybridization of religious traditions in contemporary Thailand. Kitiarsa also delved into the lives of Thai migrant workers in Singapore, examining how they maintained their cultural identities through religious practices. A respected academic, Kitiarsa's contributions

Western scholars like William Klausner have offered a contrasting view, focusing on the challenges of imposing Theravada Buddhism on highland and migrant communities. Klausner's research revealed how the state's missionary efforts often clashed with the animist and Christian traditions of groups like the Hmong and Vietnamese refugees. He argued that these efforts sometimes reinforced the marginalization of these communities, framing them as cultural outsiders within the Thai nation. Klausner's work highlights the limitations of religious assimilation as a one-size-fits-all approach, emphasizing the resilience of diverse spiritual practices in the face of state pressure.[30]

The Thai monarchy has long been portrayed as a unifying force, and scholars like Thongchai Winichakul have explored its role in creating national cohesion during the post-war period. King Bhumibol Adulyadej's rural development projects, such as the New Theory of

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continue to shape the fields of anthropology and Southeast Asian studies, offering nuanced perspectives on the adaptability of religion and culture in the face of globalization and state integration. Pattana Kitiarsa, *Buddhist in Public, Animist in Private: Modernity, Everyday Life, and the Thai Religious Cosmos* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012); Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461–487; Pattana Kitiarsa, "Buddhist in Public, Animist in Private: 'Semicolonial' Modernity and the Thai Religious Cosmos," in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, ed. Pattana Kitiarsa (London: Routledge, 2008), 141–160.

[30] William J. Klausner is a prominent scholar and expert in Thai studies, and has been closely associated with the Siam Society, where he served as a president and dedicated his career to fostering cross-cultural understanding. His seminal work, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, offers nuanced analyses of Thai social values, traditions, and the challenges of integrating diverse ethnic and religious communities into the national framework. Klausner's research extends to the dynamics of Theravada Buddhism, animism, and minority traditions, particularly among highland groups such as the Hmong and Vietnamese refugees. His studies emphasize the tensions between state-imposed religious assimilation and the resilience of localized spiritual practices. William J. Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1993).

Agriculture are often cited as examples of how the monarchy bridged the gap between urban elites and rural populations. Thongchai argued that these projects not only improved living conditions in remote areas but also strengthened loyalty to the monarchy, making it a cornerstone of Thai identity.[31] His research highlights the monarchy's strategic use of development as a means of integrating diverse regions into a cohesive national framework.

Duncan McCargo, in his influential book *Network Monarchy*, critiqued the idealized portrayal of the Thai monarchy. McCargo argued that while King Bhumibol's image as a benevolent unifier was widely celebrated, it often masked the monarchy's role in consolidating state power and suppressing dissent.[32] His analysis of the monarchy's selective engagement with certain ethnic groups revealed how its integrative efforts were sometimes more symbolic than substantive. McCargo's work provides a critical counterpoint to narratives that unconditionally celebrate the monarchy's role in national unity.

Prasit Leepreecha focuses primarily on the cultural identity and kinship structures of the Hmong communities in Thailand, offering critical insights into their social organization and

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[31] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

[32] Duncan McCargo is a leading political scientist and scholar specializing in Southeast Asian politics, particularly Thailand. His seminal concept of "network monarchy," introduced in his 2005 article in *The Pacific Review*, critically examines the Thai monarchy's role in politics, highlighting its use of a network of elites to exert influence while maintaining an idealized public image. McCargo has authored numerous books, including *Fighting for Virtue: Justice and Politics in Thailand and Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*, which delve into the complexities of Thai political life. His work has significantly shaped academic discourse on the intersection of monarchy, democracy, and power in Thailand. Duncan McCargo, *Fighting for Virtue: Justice and Politics in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *The Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519.

responses to nationalism and globalization.[33] While his research does not directly address Vietnamese migrants or their socio-economic contributions in Northeast Thailand, his studies highlight the broader challenges faced by ethnic minorities in maintaining their cultural heritage within the framework of modern nation-states. Other scholars, such as Tran Thi Tam and Ajirapa Pienkhuntod, have examined the integration of Vietnamese migrants in Isan provinces like Udon Thani and Mukdahan during the mid-20th century, particularly amidst geopolitical upheavals like the Indochina Wars.[34] Vietnamese refugees adapted their traditional skills to local Thai

[33] Prasit Leepreecha's contributions significantly advance the historiography of ethnic and displaced communities in Thailand, particularly through his detailed ethnographic and historical analyses of Hmong groups. Works such as *Khek Noi: 50 Years of the Battlefield and Land Rights* and *Mong Chuay Rob* illuminate the intersections of state policies, ethnic identity, and land rights. These studies are invaluable to understanding the dynamics of assimilation and resistance among highland ethnic communities during and after the Cold War. His exploration of displaced communities in *Thai Plat Tin Phak Nuea* bridges gaps in understanding the impacts of border creation on national identity and citizenship. These themes resonate deeply with the dissertation's focus on assimilation and the negotiation of ethnic identities in Thailand's highlands and lowlands, providing both empirical data and theoretical frameworks essential for analyzing the Thai state's interaction with its ethnic minorities. Prasit Leepreecha, Yongyuth Suptaayaat, and Urai Yangcheepsucharit, *Khek Noi: 50 Pi Samorapoom Lae Sitthi The Din* [Khek Noi: 50 Years of the Battlefield and Land Rights] (Phetchabun: 50 Years Khek Noi Publishing Committee, 2020; Prasit Leepreecha et al., *Mong Chuay Rob: Khwam Pen Ma Lae Panha Sathanapukon* [The Hmong Who Helped Fight: Background and the Problem of Legal Status] (Chiang Mai: Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University, 2017); Prasit Leepreecha et al., *Thai Plat Tin Phak Nuea: Prawattisat Chatiphan Lae Promdaen Rath Chat* [Displaced Thais of the North: Ethno-History and the Border of the Nation-State] (Chiang Mai: Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University, 2015); Prasit Leepreecha et al., *50 Pi Pa Klang: Prawat Chatiphan Lae Phaen Phatthana Chumchon Mong* [50 Years of Pa Klang: Ethnic History and Community Development Plans] (Chiang Mai: Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University, 2018).

[34] Tran Thi Tam and Ajirapa Pienkhuntod, "Acculturation of Vietnamese Immigrants in Northeastern Thailand: An Analysis of Multiple Determining Factors," *Political Science and Public Administration Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 55–74.

markets through agriculture, small-scale trade, and artisan industries, fostering hybrid cultural identities by adopting Thai language, dress, and Buddhist practices while preserving aspects of their ethnic heritage. The establishment of Vietnamese neighborhoods as hubs of entrepreneurial activity highlights their dual role as economic contributors and cultural intermediaries, challenging simplistic narratives of resistance versus assimilation and showcasing the nuanced ways migrant communities navigate their roles in a host society.

This research makes significant contributions to Thai historiography by addressing critical gaps in our understand of ethnic assimilation, integration and national identity and how geography, highland and lowland, creates either a barrier or the lack there of, to propagating Thainess. Thainess (*khwampenthai*) refers to the constructed national identity promoted by the Thai state, characterized by the centrality of the Thai language, Theravada Buddhism, and loyalty to the monarchy.[35] Rooted in state-led Thaification efforts from the mid twentieth century, Thainess served as a unifying framework to assimilate diverse ethnic and cultural groups within Thailand while reinforcing the dominance of lowland Central Thai culture. First, it offers a comparative perspective on the assimilation experiences of highland and lowland communities, a dimension that has often been overlooked in scholarship dominated by Central Thai narratives. The juxtaposition highlights the varied trajectories of assimilation of understanding the agency of ethnic minorities in shaping their integration into the national framework. This approach augments existing scholarship by moving beyond centralized narratives and bringing regional histories to the forefront.

[35] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 30-35.

In the chapters that follow, this study will unravel the intertwined stories of cultural preservation and state-driven assimilation, revealing the delicate balance between diversity and unity that continues to define Thailand's national identity. By exploring the interplay between highland and lowland communities, migrant populations, and state institutions, this research sheds light on how Thailand has historically sought to reconcile its ethnic and cultural diversity within a cohesive framework of Thainess. Each chapter addresses a unique aspect of this dynamic, from the historical construction of national identity in the lowlands to the integration challenges faced by highland communities and refugees. Together, these chapters illustrate how state policies and local responses have shaped a multifaceted national identity that both embraces and marginalizes its diverse populations.

CHAPTER 1: FROM *MUANG* TO MOUNTAINS: MAPPING THAI IDENTITY ACROSS THE LOWLANDS AND HIGHLANDS COMMUNITIES

The history of the contemporary Kingdom of Thailand is rooted in a complex mosaic of historically autonomous polities, including kingdoms, city-states, and village networks that operated independently yet occasionally intersected through warfare, trade, diplomacy, and religious diffusion. From prehistoric settlements such as Ban Chiang (2100 BCE–200 CE) in the Northeast to the Dvaravati polities (6th–11th centuries CE) in the central plains, and the maritime Srivijayan-linked networks of the southern peninsula (7th–13th centuries), the region was never politically unified until the late 18th century. The emergence of Sukhothai in the 13th century (est. 1238) and Ayutthaya in 1350 marked the beginning of a centralizing Thai political identity, later crystallized under the Chakri dynasty in 1782 with the founding of Rattanakosin (Bangkok). However, this central identity emerged alongside regional and ethnic diversity. Highland ethnic groups in the North and West, such as the Karen, Lisu, and Hmong, became "pseudo-subjects" of lowland kingdoms. They were sometimes taxed or conscripted for labor but generally remained outside administrative control. Their roles were largely peripheral, characterized more by economic exchange than political integration.

In the North, the Lanna Kingdom (1292–1775), centered in Chiang Mai, played a crucial role in shaping a distinct northern Thai cultural and political identity. This polity developed its own written script (Tai Tham), Buddhist monastic traditions, and urban centers. Lanna alternated between independence, Burmese suzerainty (1558–1775), and eventual incorporation into Siam during King Rama I's reign (1782–1809) and formalized under King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910). Highland communities, including the Karen, Hmong, and Lua, retained significant autonomy during these centuries, forming fragmented sovereignties amidst mountainous terrain.

At the same time, lowland ethnic minorities such as the Mon, whose Dvaravati heritage predated even Sukhothai, became partially assimilated into urban Thai society, particularly in cities like Lopburi and Nakhon Pathom. The Phu Thai offer a telling example of spatial and cultural reclassification: originally a highland Lao-speaking group in areas of present-day Laos (especially in regions influenced by Lan Xang, 14th–18th centuries), they were forcibly resettled into northeastern Siam (modern Isan) during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, especially after the fall of Vientiane in 1828. Over time, they became lowland rice cultivators and adopted many markers of Thai identity, particularly through Buddhism and education of the 20th century.

While not the focus in this research, in the South, polities like Nakhon Si Thammarat, Pattani, and Songkhla interacted with Ayutthaya and Srivijaya, reflecting a blend of Malay, Mon, and Thai influences. The Srivijayan influence was strong from the 7th to 13th centuries, while Pattani functioned as a tributary state with a largely Malay-Muslim population well into the 19th century. Full integration of the South into the Thai state occurred under the administrative reforms of the Thesaphiban system in the 1890s, led by King Chulalongkorn.[36] These reforms sought to standardize provincial governance, subsume peripheral identities, and promote a shared concept of Thainess grounded in loyalty to the monarchy, Buddhism, and the nation. The overlapping spheres of influence, Lan Xang in the northeast, Burmese power in the north, and

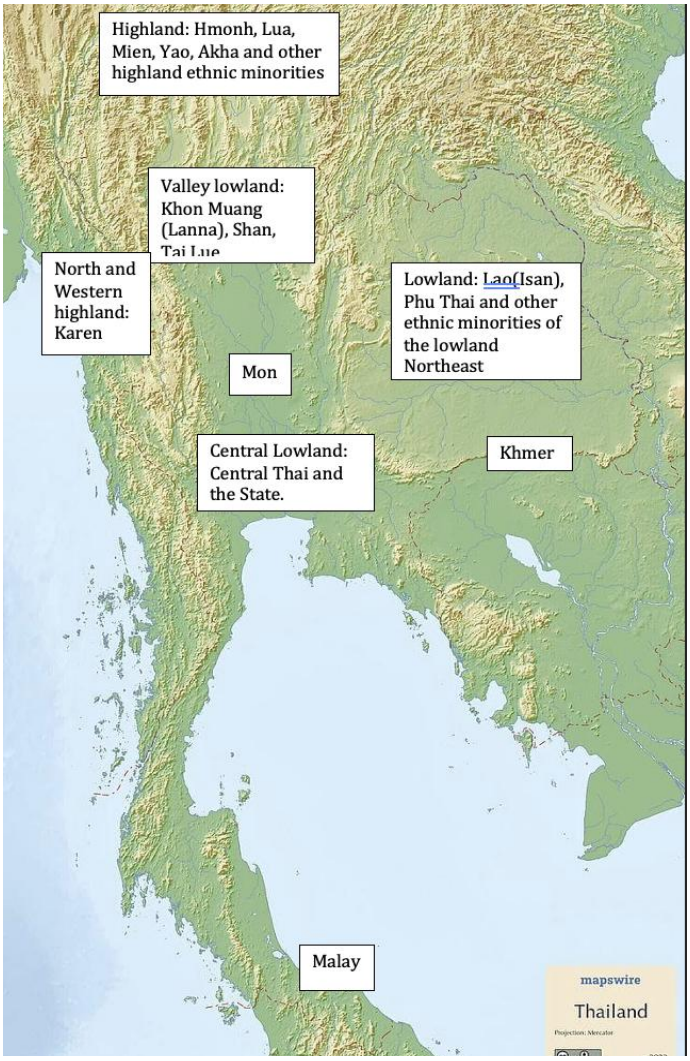
[36] The Thesaphiban system was a centralized administrative reform implemented during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in the late 19th century to consolidate Siam's territorial control and modernize governance. It reorganized the kingdom into a hierarchy of provinces (monthon, changwat, amphoe), replacing semi-autonomous *muang* with directly governed administrative units overseen by Bangkok-appointed officials. This system played a critical role in integrating peripheral regions—including the North, Northeast, and South—into the Thai state amid growing colonial threats. King Chulalongkorn, *The Diaries and Travel Writings of King Chulalongkorn of Siam*, Southeast Asia Digital Library, Northern Illinois University, accessed May 10, 2025.

Malay-Islamic networks in the south, demonstrate how Thai national identity was not a linear cultural inheritance but a composite forged through negotiation and selective assimilation. By the early to mid-20th century, particularly during the nationalist regimes of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram (1938–1944, 1948–1957), the state pursued a more aggressive form of Thaification, drawing on these layered historical relationships to incorporate both highland and lowland minorities into the national imagination.

The modern concept of "Thai" identity, or Thainess, is often portrayed as a unified and timeless cultural essence rooted in the Central Plains of the 21st century country. Yet, this perception masks a far more complex historical reality, in which diverse ethnic groups, regional cultures, and geopolitical forces have played formative roles in shaping what it means to be Thai. This chapter visits the historical construction of Thai identity from a comparative perspective, exploring both lowland and highland regions of Thailand. By tracing the origins of lowland Thai society, the integration and marginalization of highland cultures, the consolidation of Thai national identity under the Chakri dynasty of the Rattanakosin period, and the transformations prompted by global events such has World War II (WWII), the chapter aims to provide a critical framework for understanding the selective and contested processes of assimilation that occurred between 1945 and 1980.

This chapter addresses the foundational research question of how geography, particularly the contrast between lowland and highland regions, influenced the Thai state's assimilation policies and their varied outcomes between 1945 and 1980. Focusing first on the lowlands, these regions, marked by fertile plains, navigable rivers, and deep historical connections to the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms, served as conduits for the expansion of Thai state institutions such as education, Buddhism, and royal development projects. State intervention in

these arenas was instrumental in aligning local populations with Central Thai norms, thereby


Highland: Hmonh, Lua, Mien, Yao, Akha and other highland ethnic minorities
Valley lowland: Khon Muang (Lanna), Shan, Tai Lue
North and Western highland: Karen
Lowland: Lao(Isan), Phu Thai and other ethnic minorities of the lowland Northeast
Mon
Central Lowland: Central Thai and the State.
Khmer
Malay
mapswire
Thailand

Map 1: Ethnic Map of Thailand

Illustrates the geographic and ethnic complexity that underlies the concept of Thainess. The map delineates regions inhabited by various ethnic groups, some are not present on the map, ranging from Central Lowland core dominated by the Central Thai and the state, to valley lowlands like Lanna, and Northeastern zones (Isan), home to Lao, Phu Thai, and other minorities. It also marks highland regions populated by hill tribes including the Hmong, Lua, Akha, and Karen. These spatial divisions highlight the layered historical processes of assimilation and state integration where the Thai state centralized its identity around the Central Thai narrative, marginalizing peripheral and ethnically diverse regions. The map reinforces the chapter's core argument that modern Thai identity was shaped through selective incorporation of regional identities and the erasure or absorption of ethnic diversity into a unifying, but often exclusionary, national identity. All information inserted into the image is made by the author. Source: Mapswire, "Thailand – Free Map," Mapswire.com, accessed May 10, 2025, https://mapswire.com/maps/thailand/

reinforcing a cohesive Thai national identity.

In contrast, the highlands of Northern Thailand, home to groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Lua, presented challenges to state integration due to their rugged topography and relative isolation. These factors enabled highland communities to preserve distinct cultural identities, even as they became the subjects of fragmented and often coercive state assimilation programs. Development initiatives and re-education efforts routinely clashed with entrenched local customs and ecological practices, highlighting the contested nature of assimilation in these regions. This chapter explores how geographical differences not only shaped state strategies but also conditioned the responses of ethnic communities, setting the stage for the comparative historical analysis that follows.

The modern concept of "Thai" identity, or Thainess, is often portrayed as a unified and timeless cultural essence rooted in the Central Plains of the 21st century country. Yet, this perception masks a far more complex historical reality, in which diverse ethnic groups, regional cultures, and geopolitical forces have played formative roles in shaping what it means to be Thai. This chapter visits the historical construction of Thai identity from a comparative perspective, exploring both lowland and highland regions of Thailand. By tracing the origins of lowland Thai society, the integration and marginalization of highland cultures, the consolidation of Thai national identity under the Chakri dynasty of the Rattanakosin period, and the transformations prompted by global events such has World War II (WWII), the chapter aims to provide a critical framework for understanding the selective and contested processes of assimilation that occurred between 1945 and 1980.

This chapter addresses the foundational research question of how geography, particularly the contrast between lowland and highland regions, influenced the Thai state's assimilation

policies and their varied outcomes between 1945 and 1980. Focusing first on the lowlands, these regions, marked by fertile plains, navigable rivers, and deep historical connections to the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms, served as conduits for the expansion of Thai state institutions such as education, Buddhism, and royal development projects. State intervention in these arenas was instrumental in aligning local populations with Central Thai norms, thereby reinforcing a cohesive Thai national identity.

In contrast, the highlands of Northern Thailand, home to groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Lua, presented challenges to state integration due to their rugged topography and relative isolation. These factors enabled highland communities to preserve distinct cultural identities, even as they became the subjects of fragmented and often coercive state assimilation programs. Development initiatives and re-education efforts routinely clashed with entrenched local customs and ecological practices, highlighting the contested nature of assimilation in these regions. This chapter explores how geographical differences not only shaped state strategies but also conditioned the responses of ethnic communities, setting the stage for the comparative historical analysis that follows.

The Origins of "Thai" Society: Lowland Foundations

The historical narrative of Thailand has long been dominated by Central Thai perspectives that elevate the histories of the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya Kingdoms as the definitive origins of Thai civilization. This framing has shaped mainstream historiography, positioning the Central Plains, particularly the Chao Praya River Basin, as both the cultural and political heartland of the Thai nation. Early Thai historians such as Prince Damrong Rajanubhab helped established this narrative, portraying Central Thai polities as the rightful inheritors of the Thai

identity and marginalizing peripheral regions and ethnic groups.[37] David K. Wyatt, in *Thailand: A Short History*, challenges this centralizing tendency by emphasizing the unevenness of nation-building and the overlooked contribution of non-Central Thai regions. The romanticized vision of Sukhothai as a "golden age" under King Ramakhamhaeng and the continuity of monarchy and Buddhism as unifying forces, while ideologically potent, often obscures the complexities of ethnic diversity and local autonomy that characterized pre-modern Thailand.[38]

Recent archaeological discoveries have begun to complicate the Sukhothai-Ayutthaya state-centered narrative. The ancient city of Si Thep, located in Phetchabun province, exemplifies this disruption. Developed from a prehistoric farming village in the Pa Sak Valley, Si Thep flourished during the Dvaravati period (6th-11th centuries) and under later Khmer influence. Its ruins predate the rise of Sukhothai and highlight a sophisticated cultural and religious landscape independent of the Central Thai polities. Thailand's Department of Fine Arts recognized Si Thep's significance as an historical site in the 1960s and the 1970s, which signaled a growing scholarly interest in regional histories and a willingness to revise Thailand's official timeline.[39] Acknowledging the importance of polities like Si Thep and the Lavo Kingdom

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[37] Justin Thomas McDaniel, "Buddhism, History, and Thai Nationalism in Prince Damrong's Historical Works," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (February 2009): 1–25. Charnvit Kasetsiri, "An Ethnic Reading of Thai History in the Twilight of the Century-Old Official Thai National Model," *International Conference on Thai Studies* (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 2008).

[38] Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 53.

[39] Thailand, Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, *The Ancient Town of Si Thep – World Heritage Nomination*, Bangkok: Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, 2023. "Thailand's Ancient Town of Si Thep Added to World Heritage List," *Phys.org*, September 19, 2023, https://phys.org/news/2023-09-thailand-ancient-town-si-thep.html.

(Lopburi), which bridge the Dvaravati and Khmer traditions, reflects a broader shift in Thai historiography: one that seeks to recover the layered and multi-ethnic pasts that shaped the territories now called Thailand. The descendants of people who did not speak an ethnolinguistic Tai-Kadai are now considered part of the essential foundation of Thai history. This is an evolving Thainess, shifting from a singular, homogenous identity to a more inclusive and pluralistic vision that embraces the country's diverse ethno-cultural roots of the lowlanders

The Lavo Kingdom is often portrayed by Thai scholars as a precursor to Sukhothai, emphasizing cultural continuity, indigenous political development, and the centrality of Buddhism. The portrayal of Lavo as a Buddhist stronghold aligns neatly with the ideological foundations of Thai nationalism in the 20th century, where Theravada Buddhism and the monarchy became defining features of Thainess. Dynastic links between Lavo and Ayutthaya further reinforce this continuity, offering a legitimizing genealogy for the modern Thai state.[40] This historical continuity creates modern conceptions of Thai statehood, crafting a national identity rooted in an unbroken lineage of sovereign rule. However, Western scholars have offered alternative views, emphasizing migration and cultural hybridity. They argue that the ancestors of the Thai migrated southward from China and integrated with existing Mon, Khmer,

[40] The dynastic links between the Lavo and Ayutthaya kingdoms reinforced a narrative of political and cultural continuity that legitimized the emerging Thai state. Through familiar ties, such as those of King Ramathobodi I, who had connections to both Lavo and Suphannaphum, Ayutthaya claimed succession to earlier polities, solidifying its authority through dynastic legitimacy. Lavo's integration brought not only territorial expansion that also administrative practices and cultural legacies that Ayutthaya used to present itself as the rightful heir to regional power. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 25–30; Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 44–49.

and Austroasiatic communities.[41] This migratory thesis challenges Thai nationalist narratives by highlighting the constructed nature of Thai identity and its emergence through historical interaction rather than primordial origin.

The ascent of Sukhothai in the 13th century marked a turning point in lowland history. Celebrated as the "first Thai kingdom," Sukhothai under King Ramkhamhaeng championed paternalistic kingship, created the Thai script, and adopted Theravada Buddhism as a national ideology.[42] The Ramkhamhaeng Inscription from the 11th century was instrumental in shaping modern interpretations of the Sukhothai period; it details the creation of the "Thai" script, the promotion of Theravada Buddhism, and the existence of the king (Ramkhamhaeng) as a benevolent ruler who ensured justice and prosperity for his people.[43] These developments formalized the trajectory of a centralized Thai identity grounded in language, monarchy, and religion. Sukhothai's influence waned by the late 14th century, yet its cultural legacy persisted, providing ideological scaffolding for its successor, the Ayutthaya Kingdom.

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[41] James R Chamberlain, "Kra-Dai and the Proto-History of South China and Vietnam," *Journal of the Siam Society* 104 (2016): 27–77; Pittayaporn, Pittayawat, "Layers of Chinese Loanwords in Proto-Southwestern Tai as Evidence for the Dating of the Spread of Southwestern Tai," *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities* 20, Special Issue (2014): 47–64.

[42] George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1968), 199–205; Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 45–52. C. B. Bradley, "The Oldest Known Writing in Siamese: The Inscription of Phra Ram Khamhaeng of Sukhothai, 1293 A.D.," *Journal of the Siam Society* 20, no. 1 (1926): 1–20; Michael Vickery, *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy: Collected Papers* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1991), 15–33.

[43] Ramkhamhaeng, *The Inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng (1292 A.D.)*, trans. A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, in *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, vol. 1 (Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department, 1968), 1–28.

Ayutthaya (1350-1767) epitomized lowland centralization and cosmopolitanism. Drawing from Khmer, Mon, and Tai traditions, it created a multi-ethnic, bureaucratic state. Its court rituals, sartorial culture, and religious syncretism laid the aesthetic and administrative groundwork for modern Thai governance.[44] For example, the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya portray the kingdom's rulers as *dhamma raja* (righteous kings), reinforcing a model of divine kingship and orderly governance that later became central to the Thai state's conception of legitimate rule and national identity.[45] Through its expansive trade networks and military conquests, Ayutthaya unified much of the region under its rule while promoting Buddhism and the Thai language as symbols of national unity.[46] However, this drive toward integration also deepened the marginalization of highland groups, such as the Karen and Lua, whose ecological practices and spiritual traditions were deemed incompatible with the centralized state's vision of development.

From its inception, Ayutthaya displayed a strong multicultural character. The kingdom absorbed and integrated Khmer, Mon, and Tai influences, while also maintaining extensive trade networks that connected it to China, India, Persia, Japan, and Europe.[47] In *A New Historical*

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[44] Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World*, 112–130; Michael Vickery, "The Constitution of Ayutthaya," *Journal of the Siam Society* 66, no. 2 (1978): 123–180

[45] Richard D. Cushman, trans. *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, ed. David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2000), 45–48.

[46] Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit*, A History of Ayutthaya*; J. S. F. Smith, "State, Community, and Ethnicity in Early Modern Thailand, 1351–1767" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2019).

[47] Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya*; Ryuto Shimada, "Economic Links with Ayutthaya: Changes in Networks between Japan, China, and Siam in the Early

Relation of the Kingdom of Siam (1691), Simon de La Loubère, a French envoy to the Ayutthaya court, described the kingdom as a flourishing, multi-ethnic hub of commerce, where Persian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and European traders coexisted and engaged in extensive trade, reflecting Ayutthaya's central role in the global networks of early modern empires.[48] Ayutthaya's rulers adopted a pragmatic approach to governance, encouraging assimilation while preserving local autonomy in some regions. For example, after the fall of the Mon kingdom of Hongsawadi (Pegu) to the Burmese in the 16th century, many Mon refugees fled into Ayutthaya's domain. Rather than forcibly assimilate them, Ayutthaya's rulers allowed the Mon to settle in semi-autonomous communities, practice Theravada Buddhism, and maintain their language and customs that were eventually assimilated into local identity. In return, the Mon provided military service and administrative support, particularly as interpreters and scribes in regional affairs.[49] This approach both strengthened Ayutthaya's frontier defenses and enhanced its multicultural bureaucracy, demonstrating a flexible policy of conditional inclusion that preserved local identity while reinforcing central authority. Additionally, early kings, such as

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Modern Period," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 75–95; Barend Jan Terwiel, "Seventeenth-Century Foreign Lives of Ayutthaya," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (2021): 423–443.

[48] Simon de La Loubère, a French envoy to the Ayutthaya court, described the kingdom as a flourishing, multi-ethnic hub of commerce where Persian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and European traders coexisted and engaged in extensive trade, reflecting Ayutthaya's central role in the global networks of early modern empires. Simon de La Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam*, trans. A. P. Gen (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1969 [originally published 1691]), 45–52.

[49] Richard D. Cushman, trans., *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2006), 395–397; Edward Van Roy, "Safe Haven: Mon Refugees at the Capitals of Siam from the 1500s to the 1800s," *Journal of the Siam Society* 98 (2010): 1–30.

Ramathibodi I, promoted Theravada Buddhism as a unifying cultural and religious force, while also incorporating Hindu and Khmer court traditions into their administrative practices.[50] This blending of influences laid the groundwork for the kingdom's distinctive form of governance, which combined religious authority with political centralization.

Ayutthaya's ability to integrate and manage its multicultural population was further demonstrated in its cosmopolitan capital city, which became a prominent site of trade and cultural exchange. By the sixteenth century, Ayutthaya had attracted merchants and settlers from Asia and beyond, including Chinese, Malay, Indian, Japanese, and Persian communities, as well as European traders from Portugal, the Netherlands, and France.[51] This influx of foreigners contributed to Ayutthaya's economic prosperity and cultural vibrancy. However, the kingdom's policies increasingly emphasized the promotion of a unified Siamese identity, with Buddhism

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[50] Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 52-60.

[51] During the Ayutthaya period, the kingdom's cosmopolitan nature and strategic position attracted a diverse array of foreign merchants, diplomats, and settlers, some of whom rose to prominent positions in the royal court and administration, earning noble titles. Under King Narai (reigned 1656–1688), one of the most notable figures was Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek adventurer who became the royal counselor and held the title *Chao Phraya Wichayen*, playing a key role in Ayutthaya's diplomatic relations with France. Similarly, Japanese settlers, who formed a well-organized community in Ayutthaya known as the "Japanese Quarter," produced figures like Yamada Nagamasa, a samurai who became a trusted military officer and was granted the title *Okya Senaphimuk*. Persian merchants also held significant influence, such as Sheikh Ahmad, who served as a royal official during King Songtham's reign (1611–1628) and founded a powerful Persian-Thai lineage that shaped the court's policies on trade and finance. These foreign elites integrated into Ayutthaya's political system, bridging cultural divides and enhancing the kingdom's connections to global trade networks. Their presence underscores Ayutthaya's openness and adaptability, as well as its importance as a hub of international commerce and diplomacy. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 86-120; Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "Diplomacy: Ayutthaya ca 1688," in *The Architecture of Empire: France in India and Southeast Asia, 1664–1962* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 89–128; Baker, "Ayutthaya Rising: From Land or Sea?," 41-62.

and the Thai language serving as key markers of assimilation. As Ayutthaya grew into a wealthy, cosmopolitan hub through its trade and foreign interactions, the kingdom needed to manage internal cohesion amidst ethnic and cultural diversity. The influx of foreigners—Persians, Japanese, Chinese, Europeans—brought wealth and dynamism, but also posed a potential threat to centralized authority and social order. In response, the monarchy promoted a unified Siamese identity anchored in Buddhism and the Thai language to assert cultural hegemony, ensure loyalty to the crown, and consolidate state power.[52] This strategy helped transform Ayutthaya from a multi-ethnic trading kingdom into a precursor of the modern Thai nation-state.

Militarily, Ayutthaya was both an aggressor and a defender. Its kings launched numerous campaigns to expand their territory, particularly into Lanna in the north, the Mon heartlands to the west, and Khmer-controlled areas in the east. King Naresuan (r. 1590-1605) is remembered for his military prowess, particularly his victory over the Burmese in a famous elephant duel.[53]

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[52] *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 102–108; *The Testimonies of Ayutthaya: Early Accounts of the Fall and Reconstruction of the Siamese Kingdom*, trans. Chris Baker, Dhiravat na Pombejra, Alfons van der Kraan, and David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2016), 55–60; Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam*, 45–52.

[53] King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605) is celebrated as one of Ayutthaya's greatest warrior kings, not only for his famous victory over the Burmese in an elephant duel but also for his ambitious military campaigns to expand Ayutthaya's influence. Among these was his campaign against Khmer-controlled territories to the east, aimed at weakening Ayutthaya's long-standing rival, the Khmer Empire, and consolidating control over the resource-rich regions of Cambodia. These campaigns were part of Naresuan's broader strategy to assert dominance over neighboring states and secure Ayutthaya's borders against external threats. By targeting Khmer territories, Naresuan sought to exploit the political fragmentation within the declining Khmer Empire, which was struggling with internal strife and external pressure from both Ayutthaya and the Vietnamese. His efforts included securing key strategic locations and weakening Khmer influence over border areas. While Naresuan's military campaigns against the Khmer may not have resulted in permanent annexation of large swathes of territory, they succeeded in asserting Ayutthaya's regional dominance and cementing his legacy as a king who fought to safeguard and

Ayutthaya's military campaigns were primarily aimed at securing labor forces rather than acquiring new territories. Conquered populations were often relocated to serve as laborers, artisans, and soldiers, thereby bolstering the kingdom's economic and military strength.[54] These campaigns not only secured Ayutthaya's borders but also contributed to the kingdom's multi-ethnic composition: conquered people were often resettled within the kingdom as laborers, artisans, and soldiers.

Highland responses to Ayutthaya's military incursions, particularly during the expansionist campaigns of King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605), ranged from armed resistance to strategic retreat and negotiated autonomy. In the northern region of Lanna, which Ayutthaya sought to control in the late 16th and 17th centuries, local rulers often resisted Siamese dominance, sometimes shifting allegiance between Ayutthaya and Burma to preserve autonomy. These episodes of resistance highlight the agency of Lanna elites, who balanced regional politics to their advantage.[55] In contrast, many upland ethnic groups such as the Karen, Lahu, and Hmong, whose settlements lay beyond direct lowland control, responded to external threats by retreating into more remote terrain, effectively evading state incorporation through geographical

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expand the kingdom's power. These campaigns also underscored Ayutthaya's dual role as both a defender of its sovereignty and an aggressor in its quest for regional hegemony. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 87-92.

[54] *The Testimonies of Ayutthaya: Early Accounts of the Fall and Reconstruction of the Siamese Kingdom*, 55–60; *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 102–108.

[55] Richard D. Cushman, *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* 401–405; David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, trans. *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 110–125. Pamaree Surakiat, "Thai-Burmese Warfare During the Sixteenth Century and the Growth of the First Toungoo Empire," *Journal of the Siam Society* 93 (2005): 1–26; Sunait Chutintaranond, "Lan Na under Burma: A 'Dark Age' in Northern Thailand?" *Journal of the Siam Society* 91 (2003): 63–77.

inaccessibility.[56] Meanwhile, other highland polities negotiated tributary relationships with Ayutthaya, offering labor or forest goods in exchange for internal autonomy.[57] These varied strategies demonstrate that highland communities were neither uniformly conquered nor fully integrated but instead engaged with the expanding Siamese state in ways that preserved local authority while navigating the shifting power dynamics of the region.

Ayutthaya's fall in 1767 marked the end of an era but not the end of its legacy. The kingdom's model of centralized governance, its emphasis on Buddhism as a unifying force, and its promotion of Thai identity continued to shape the emerging Siamese state under the Chakri dynasty. The devastation caused by the Burmese invasions also reinforced the Thai state's focus on military preparedness and centralization in the centuries that followed.[58]

Despite its destruction, Ayutthaya remains a symbol of Thailand's historical elasticity and cultural ingenuity. Ayutthaya's cultural legacy extends beyond its political and military history, influencing modern definitions of Thai identity through its artistic and sartorial traditions.[59] Traditional Ayutthaya attire, such as the silk chut Thai Chakkri, originally reflected

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[56] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 22–45; Bernard Formoso, "The Karen and the Hmong: A Comparative Study of Two Hill Peoples in Thailand," in *Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, ed. Anan Ganjanapan (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 1996), 45–68.

[57] Cushman, *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 278–284; Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, trans. *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 102–107.

[58] Pamaree Surakiat, "Thai-Burmese Warfare During the Sixteenth Century," 1–24.

[59] Julispong Chularatana, "Indo-Persian Influence on Late Ayutthaya Art, Architecture, and Design," *Journal of the Siam Society* 105 (2017): 1–20; Maurizio Peleggi, *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 123–135.

the kingdom's diverse cultural influences.[60] In modern Thailand, these designs have been elevated as symbols of Thainess, standardized into national dress campaigns that prioritize a central Thai aesthetic while marginalizing minority textile traditions. This repurposing reflects Ayutthaya's enduring legacy as a cultural crucible and foundation for Thai identity.

Yet, while the central lowlands evolved into a cohesive political and cultural nucleus, the highlands remained peripheral to this consolidation: geographically remote and socially autonomous. During the period of the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms, the Karen played a notable role as suppliers of forest resources, including teak and medical plants.[61] Despite this economic relationship, the Karen maintained significant autonomy in their highland territories, as early Thai states had limited administrative reach into these regions. Over time, Buddhism began to influence Karen communities, particularly the Pwo Karen, who adopted many practices from lowland Thai culture.[62] This interaction facilitated a gradual cultural exchange but also put

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[60] *The Testimonies of Ayutthaya: Early Accounts of the Fall and Reconstruction of the Siamese Kingdom*, trans. Chris Baker, Dhiravat na Pombejra, Alfons van der Kraan, and David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2016), 76–82; Peleggi, *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*.

[61] Ian Baird, "Forest Products and Livelihoods: Karen Forestry Practices in Northern Thailand," *CORE* (2006).

[62] The adoption of Buddhist practices by the Pwo Karen illustrates how they integrated rituals and beliefs from lowland Thai culture while maintaining elements of their own spiritual traditions. The Karen occupied an important role in negotiating sacred space and power within a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse environment, particularly in the context of state influence. Yoko Hayami discusses the dynamics of religious conversions, noting that Buddhist Karen comprise approximately 20% of the Karen population, compared to the majority who were either animist or Christian in 2000. This adoption of Buddhism was shaped by both cultural exchanges and political pressures, revealing the complex interplay between religion, ethnicity, and identity within Karen communities. Yoko Hayami, "Pagodas and Prophets: Contesting Sacred Space and

an emphasis on the distinctiveness of Karen highland life within the broader political landscape of the early Thai kingdoms.

The Assimilation of Highland Cultures

While the lowlands, particularly the Central and upper lowlands (Northeastern Isan and Northern Lanna), folded relatively smoothly into this national story, the highlands remained on the periphery of both historical narratives and political inclusion. Northern Thailand's highlands, with their rugged terrain and ecological isolation, have long been home to diverse ethnic groups collectively referred to as "hill tribes." These include the Karen, Hmong, Lua, Akha, Yao, Hmong, and others, each with distinct autonomy due to their geographic isolation, reliance on swidden agriculture, animist spiritual practices, and inter-ethnic trade. As Chayan Vaddhanaphuti notes, highland groups were not always seen as outsiders. During the Lanna Kingdom era (13th–19th centuries), they were often regarded as allies, trading partners, and integral components of the regional political economy.[63] This relationship is reflected in chronicles like the *Phongsawadan Yonok* and Lanna-era temple records, which document exchanges of forest goods and the inclusion of Karen communities within the broader networks of trade, ritual patronage, and political alliance.[64] It was only with the centralization of Thai state

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Power among Buddhist Karen in Karen State," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (October 2007): 355–377.

[63] Dominique Guillaud, Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, and Olivier Evrard, *Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Presen*t (Bangkok: IRD Editions, 2012), 45–47.

[64] Phraya Prachakitkorachak, *Phongsawadan Yonok* [Chronicle of Yonok] (Bangkok: Rongphim Sophon Phanich, 1907), trans. and cited in Pongkorn Chantaraj et al., "A Study of the Local Buddhist Chronicle in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 8 (2019): 1320–1330. Pongkorn Chantaraj, Piyapong Sriwatanapongse, and Chaichana Tangsiri, "A Study

power in the late 19th and 20th centuries that highland groups became framed as internal "others." For example, the 1894 Royal Decree under King Chulalongkorn required all subjects to be officially registered as "Thai," erasing distinct ethnic identities such as the Karen, Hmong, and Lawa from administrative records and reinforcing their marginal status within the national framework.[65]

While the Lua represent a deep-rooted indigenous presence in the highlands of Northern Thailand, predating Tai political ascendancy, the Karen people entered the region as part of later migratory movements. But they also predated the Tai.[66] Together, these two groups illustrate the complex layering of highland populations: one shaped by ancient continuity, the other by mobility and adaptation. Their respective trajectories underscore the diverse origins and settlement patterns that characterize Northern Thailand's ethnic mosaic, where long-established Austroasiatic communities like the Lua coexisted and interacted with incoming groups such as the Karen, who brought with them distinct cultural and religious practices that further enriched the region's highland societies.[67]

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of the Local Buddhist Chronicle in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 8 (2019): 1320–1330.

[65] Royal Proclamation of King Chulalongkorn on National Identity Registration, 1894, in *Collected Royal Proclamations of King Rama V*, ed. NAT (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1998), 212–21.

[66] Phuttipong Sritara et al., "Genome-Wide SNP Analysis Reveals the Genetic Structure of the Lawa People and Their Relationship to Other Ethnic Groups in Mainland Southeast Asia," *BMC Genomics* 25, no. 1 (2024): 1–14.

[67] Peter Kundstadter, "Ethnic Group, Category and Identity: Karen in Northern Thailand," in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma*, ed. Charles F. Keyes (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979), 77–102; Anthony R. Walker, "From the Mountains and the Interiors: A Quarter of a Century of Research

Lowland civilizations such as Dvaravati and Lavo are frequently portrayed in Thai national historiography as the foundational roots of Thai statehood. These societies, located in the central plains, left behind monumental Buddhist architecture such as the stupas at Khu Bua, which reflect early forms of urban planning, Theravada Buddhism, and centralized polity. As tangible, state-structured sites, these monuments have been celebrated and institutionalized by Thai authorities as material proof of the nation's historical continuity. They are featured in textbooks, tourism promotions, and official heritage conservation programs, reinforcing the idea that Thai identity is anchored in lowland, Buddhist, and monumental civilization.

In contrast, the Lua people—an upland ethnic group indigenous to the northern hills of Thailand—represent a parallel and often overlooked historical trajectory. Early chronicles such as the *Cāmadevivaṃsa* acknowledge the Lua as foundational inhabitants of the Haripunchai region, predating the arrival of Mon-Buddhist civilizations. Archaeological research in the Ping River Valley has uncovered evidence of fortified Lua settlements, indicating not only complex sociopolitical organization but also sophisticated ecological adaptation to forested highland environments.[68] Unlike the visible stone stupas of Dvaravati, Lua sacred landscapes are marked by forest shrines, spirit groves, and animist ritual sites that express their cosmological relationship with the land rather than centralized religious orthodoxy.

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among Fourth World Peoples in Southeast Asia (With Special Reference to Northern Thailand and Peninsular Malaysia)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 326–343.

[68] *Cāmadevivaṃsa*, cited in Olivier Evrard and Dominique Guillaud, eds., *Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present*, NAT/CM (Chiang Mai: Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 201; Ministry of the Fine Arts, *ประกาศกรมศิลปากร เรื่อง ขึ้นทะเบียนโบราณสถาน* NAT/CM, [Announcement of the Fine Arts Department on the Registration of Ancient Monuments], iRoyal Gazette 79, no. 97 (October 30, 1962): 2279. Archived PDF, June 1, 2012.

The marginalization of Lua contributions in dominant historical narratives reveals a broader pattern in the construction of Thainess. Thai state institutions have historically privileged built, lowland Buddhist structures, especially those aligned with royal and state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism, while undervaluing the spiritual geographies and cultural systems of upland groups. By the late 20th century, this imbalance persisted in nationalization efforts that continued to focus on stupas, temples, and palaces, while largely ignoring the sacred ecologies of highland ethnic communities. By placing Dvaravati stupas and Lua Forest shrines in conversation, this chapter argues for a multi-centered understanding of Thai origins. These two traditions, the monumental and the marginal, offer complementary insights into the formation of early Thai society. One represents state-sponsored religion and urban infrastructure; the other reflects indigenous knowledge, spirituality, and environmental adaptation. Recognizing both allows for a fuller, more inclusive vision of Thai historical identity, one that moves beyond homogenized state narratives and honors the region's ethnic and cultural complexity and its contribution to Thai history.

As indigenous inhabitants, Lua served as laborers, agriculturalists, and intermediaries between the lowland centers of power and the surrounding highlands. Lua communities also participated in religious exchanges, adopting Buddhist elements while maintaining animist traditions.[69] However, as Tai polities expanded, the Lua were increasingly relegated to the highlands, where they preserved their cultural practices but became more peripheral to the emerging state systems.

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[69] Kunstadter, *The Lua' (Lawa) of Northern Thailand*, 1-6, 20-25; Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, "Lawa (Lua): A Study from Palm-Leaf Manuscripts and Stone Inscriptions," accessed December 15, 2024.

Early interactions with the Mon and emerging Tai polities positioned the Karen as intermediaries in trade networks, exchanging agricultural products and forest goods for lowland commodities. These exchanges laid the groundwork for lasting cultural and economic ties with lowland societies. This intermediary role is confirmed by ethnographic evidence showing Karen exchanges of forest goods and livestock for rice, salt, and pottery from Mon and Tai communities, reflecting a dynamic system of mutual dependence that facilitated both material and cultural integration across ecological zones.[70]

The decentralized nature of Lanna's governance allowed local rulers to preserve unique cultural practices while maintaining allegiance to the king in Chiang Mai. This system proved effective in managing the kingdom's diverse population, which included Khon Muang lowlanders and various highland ethnic groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Akha. While the Khon Muang formed the cultural core of Lanna, the kingdom's rulers often mediated between lowland and highland communities, fostering trade and religious exchange while ensuring political stability.[71] This balance between central allegiance and local autonomy is evident in the *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, which records the authority of regional rulers to manage their own affairs while participating in broader political-religious networks centered in Chiang Mai, and is further

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[70] "Karen," *eHRAF World Cultures Database*, accessed April 26, 2025, https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/cultures/ap07/summary; "Karen History," *Karen Organization of Minnesota*, accessed April 26, 2025, https://mnkaren.org/history-culture/karen-history/

[71] This emerging *Khon Muang* identity was partly shaped in opposition to the Lao, especially during and after the 19th-century incorporation of the Lanna region into the Siamese state when elite efforts sought to distinguish Northern Tai populations from the Lao of the northeast, who were viewed as politically and culturally subordinate. Hans Penth, *A Brief History of Lanna: Northern Thailand from Past to Present* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001), 43-50.

supported by the 1962 Royal Gazette listing of Lanna-era monuments that highlight the spatial and cultural diversity under local custodianship.[72] This ability to integrate highland and lowland peoples into a cohesive polity distinguished Lanna from its more homogenized central Thai counterparts.

Despite their integration into Lanna, small principalities like Nanburi and Lamphun maintained distinctive identities that enriched the kingdom's cultural diversity. Nan's strong trade networks and Lamphun's Mon heritage allowed them to contribute unique elements to Lanna's economic and religious life.[73] These smaller polities also played a vital role in Lanna's interactions with external powers, providing strategic footholds and cultural connections that strengthened the kingdom's position in regional politics. This dynamic is supported by the *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, which records diplomatic missions and alliances involving Nan and Lamphun, demonstrating how these polities acted as both cultural custodians and strategic

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[72] *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, in *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 45–53. Fine Arts Department, *ประกาศกรมศิลปากร เรื่อง ขึ้นทะเบียนโบราณสถาน* [Announcement of the Fine Arts Department on the Registration of Ancient Monuments], NAT/CM, *Royal Gazette* 79, no. 97 (October 30, 1962): 2279. Archived PDF, June 1, 2012.

[73] In this research, the distinction between Nanburi and Nan is analytically significant because it allows for a clear examination of political autonomy, assimilation, and the changing meaning of belonging overtime. When referring to Nanburi, this study denotes a small, independent lowland city state that exist among the highland that operated with its own local Tai Lue rulers, social hierarchies, and cultural norms prior to incorporation into larger political entities. Nanburi represents a pre annexation political space in which ethnic identity, governance, and everyday life were negotiated largely outside direct Siamese or Lanna control. By contrast, Nan in this research refers to the annexed city and later province that became part of the Lanna polity and, subsequently, the modern Thai state. This distinction enables the study to trace how the transition from a semi-autonomous principality to an integrated provincial unit reshaped local identities, religious practices, and relationships with the central state.

intermediaries in Lanna's broader regional diplomacy.[74] The shared Buddhist traditions of Nan, Lamphun, and Lanna further unified the region, creating a cohesive religious and cultural identity that persisted even under external pressures.

By the 16th and 17th centuries, waves of Tai Lue migration were driven by the expansion of neighboring powers, such as the Burmese Toungoo dynasty, as well as by internal conflicts in Sipsong Panna. Many Tai Lue sought refuge in the Lanna Kingdom, where they were welcomed for their skills in agriculture, weaving, and religious scholarship.[75] This dynamic is substantiated in the *Chiang Khaeng Chronicles*, which document the movements of Tai Lue elites and their strategic alliances with Lanna rulers, emphasizing their valued social roles in regional administration and Buddhist networks.[76] Chinese imperial records further corroborate these

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[74] David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, trans. *Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 58–63.

[75] The forced migration of the Tai Lue into Nan occurred during the late sixteenth century, following the city's devastation during conflicts between the Lanna Kingdom and the Burmese Toungoo dynasty. In 1558, under the leadership of King Bayinnaung of Toungoo, Burmese forces captured and subjugated much of the Lanna Kingdom, including Nan, causing widespread depopulation and devastation. By the 1570s, Nan was largely deserted due to continued warfare and political instability. To rebuild the city and restore its economic and cultural vitality, Lanna rulers, particularly under King Mekuti and later King Saen Luang, orchestrated the relocation of Tai Lue communities from Sipsong Panna. The Tai Lue, under the leadership of their own local nobles, were forcibly resettled in Nan, valued for their expertise in agriculture, irrigation, and weaving. This migration revitalized Nan's population and infrastructure while integrating Tai Lue cultural elements, such as their script, Buddhist practices, and textile arts, into the region. These resettlement efforts not only ensured Nan's recovery as a strategic center but also strengthened cultural and political ties between the Tai Lue and the Lanna Kingdom during this turbulent era. Prasit Leepreecha and Songkran Jantakad, "The Stateless Tai Lue in Chiang Kham," *ASR: CMU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2020).

[76] Chiang Khaeng was a Tai Lue principality situated along the upper Mekong frontier, functioning as a semi-autonomous polity that managed cross-border trade, upheld Buddhist

patterns, illustrating how shifting tributary relationships and political instability in Sipsong Panna prompted migrations that integrated Tai Lue communities into the sociopolitical fabric of Northern Thailand.[77]

In the Lanna Kingdom, the Tai Lue became an integral part of the region's socio-cultural fabric. The Lanna rulers recognized the Tai Lue's expertise in rice cultivation and water management, which aligned with Lanna's agricultural economy.[78] This is affirmed by the *Chiang Khaeng Chronicle*, which records how Tai Lue leaders established stable agrarian communities along fertile river valleys and collaborated with Lanna rulers, underscoring their valued role in sustaining regional agricultural systems.[79] These cross-cultural exchanges were not limited to the Tai Lue. They formed part of a broader Tai ethno-cultural world that extended into neighboring highland regions, particularly among the Shan. Like the Tai Lue, the Shan shared linguistic roots and religious traditions with other Tai-speaking groups, including the Lanna Thai and Lao, but retained distinct historical trajectories. The proximity of Lanna to Shan territories fostered

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scholarship, and navigated tributary ties with both Lanna and Chinese imperial authorities. Nathan Badenoch and Shinsuke Tomita, "Chiang Khaeng Revisited: A Tai Lü Principality in the Upper Mekong," *Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 95–131.

[77] The Tai polity of Müang Lü in Sipsong Panna was a complex mandala-style kingdom governed by Tai Lue elites. It maintained tributary relations with China while exerting regional influence through religious patronage, trade, and strategic alliances with neighboring Tai states. Volker Grabowsky, "The Tai Polity of Müang Lü (Sipsong Panna) and the Chinese World Order in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the Siam Society* 86, no. 1–2 (1998): 1–20.

[78] "Rong Ngæ Temple: A Sanctuary of Faith and a Tapestry of Tai Lue Life," *Nan Creative City*, accessed December 6, 2024.

[79] Badenoch and Shinsuke, "Chiang Khaeng Revisited."

frequent contact, through trade, intermarriage, warfare, and religious exchange, which contributed to a shared yet diverse Tai political landscape

Historically, the Shan were a dominant force in the political and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia, establishing powerful kingdoms and city-states that thrived on trade, agriculture, and Buddhism. Over centuries, waves of migration brought Shan communities into Northern Thailand, where they settled in areas such as Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Rai, contributing to the cultural diversity of the region. The Shan trace their origins to the historical Tai migration from southern China during the first millennium, settling in the highlands of present-day Myanmar and neighboring regions. By the thirteenth century, the Shan had established a network of city-states known as muang, which were governed by local rulers called sawbwa. These city-states, such as Kengtung, Mongnai, and Hsenwi, operated semi-independently while engaging in trade and diplomacy with neighboring powers like the Lanna Kingdom, Lan Xang, and the Burmese kingdoms of Ava and Toungoo.[80]

At the same time, the Shan and Lanna competed for control over key trade routes and territories in the mountainous regions of Northern Thailand and Myanmar.[81] These interactions

[80] The city-states of Kengtung, Mongnai, and Hsenwi operated as semi-autonomous polities within the Tai cultural sphere, leveraging their strategic positions to engage in trade, tribute, and diplomacy with surrounding powers. They maintained fluid relations with larger neighboring entities, including the Lanna Kingdom, Lan Xang, and the Burmese kingdoms of Ava and Toungoo. These interactions were shaped by the geopolitical dynamics of the region, with the city-states serving as conduits for trade and cultural exchange while navigating fluctuating allegiances to preserve their autonomy. Their ties often reflected pragmatic considerations, such as economic opportunities and military pressures, enabling them to adapt to shifting power structures in the region. Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile*, vol. 16 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 3-23.

[81] Yawnghwe, *The Shan of Burma*, 19.

fostered a dynamic cultural exchange. This rivalry is detailed in the Chiang Mai Chronicle, which records military campaigns and diplomatic encounters between Lanna and the Shan polities, revealing not only their territorial ambitions but also the shared religious patronage and intermarriages that facilitated cross-cultural exchange.[82] These accounts suggest how conflict and cooperation between Lanna and Shan were not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined processes that enabled the circulation of monks, artisans, and ideas, ultimately altered the landscape of the northern highlands.

While groups like the Karen maintained cultural autonomy at the margins of the centralizing lowland kingdoms, the highland valleys of the north witnessed the emergence of a more regionally integrated polity in the form of the Lanna Kingdom. The Lanna Kingdom, founded in 1292 by King Mangrai, emerged as a powerful state. Distinguished by its decentralized governance and vibrant local traditions, Lanna became a center of cultural, religious, and economic influence for centuries. Unlike the centralized structures of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, Lanna's system allowed considerable autonomy to local rulers (chao), enabling it to accommodate the region's diverse highland and lowland populations. The kingdom's capital, Chiang Mai, strategically located in a fertile river valley, became the heart of Lanna's political and cultural life. Known as the "New City," Chiang Mai flourished as a hub of Theravada Buddhism, art, literature, and commerce, shaping the Khon Muang (Thai Yuan) identity as distinct from the central Thai kingdoms.

[82] David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo, trans. *Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 58–63.

The Mainstreaming of Thainess by the Chakri Dynasty

The Rattanakosin period of the Chakri Dynasty saw significant territorial consolidation and the reassertion of Siamese dominance over former vassal states. During the reigns of Rama I to Rama II (reign 1809–1824), Siam conducted military campaigns to subjugate Lanna, the Lao kingdoms of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and the Khmer territories of Cambodia.[83] These conquests not only expanded Siam's territorial influence but also resulted in significant population transfers, particularly from Lao and Khmer territories, which reshaped the demographic composition of Siam. The forced migration of people into central Siam and Isan contributed to the development of a multi-ethnic yet increasingly centralized state. This process is vividly illustrated in the *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, which recounts Siam's strategic resettlement of populations following military campaigns in the north, reinforcing Bangkok's control through demographic engineering.[84] Similarly, accounts of the Lao Rebellion (1826–1828) document how defeated Lao populations were forcibly relocated into Siamese heartland.[85] This reveals the extent to which population transfers were integral to centralizing authority and constructing a multi-ethnic Siamese state.

By the early eighteenth century, Lan Xang had splintered into three successor states: the Kingdom of Vientiane, the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, and the Kingdom of Champasak. These divisions weakened the region's ability to resist the expansionist ambitions of Siam (modern

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[83] Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 123-157, 134-136, 139, 189,141.

[84] *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, 44.

[85] Volker Grabowsky, "The Isan up to Its Integration into the Siamese State," in *Regions and National Integration in Thailand, 1892–1992*, ed. Volker Grabowsky (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 107–129.

Thailand).[86] Siamese campaigns in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries under Kings Taksin of Thonburi and Rama I brought Lan Xang's territories under Siamese control. Forced population transfers relocated large numbers of Lao-speaking people from the left bank of the Mekong into Isan, reshaping the demographic and cultural landscape of Northeastern Thailand.[87] This process of conquest and relocation exemplified how Siam's expanding lowland state absorbed peripheral ethnic groups, reinforcing the broader argument that Thai national identity was historically constructed through layered integration and strategic demographic engineering rather than homogenous origins.

One significant event that cemented the separation between Isan and Laos was the Chao Anouvong Rebellion of 1826–1828. Chao Anouvong, the king of Vientiane, launched a rebellion against Siamese rule, seeking to reclaim Lao independence. However, the rebellion was

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[86] The term *Siam* was historically used by foreign powers and the local elite to refer to the central kingdom centered around the Chao Phraya River basin, particularly during the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods. In 1939, the country officially changed its name to *Thailand* to emphasize a modern national identity rooted in the unity of the Thai ethnic majority and to assert independence from colonial narratives. While *Siam* evokes a multi-ethnic, pre-national kingdom, *Thailand* represents a centralized, nation-state framework shaped by 20th century nationalism and state-building.

[87] The Siamese campaigns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, under Kings Taksin and Rama I, brought Lan Xang's territories under Siamese control and initiated forced population transfers that relocated large numbers of Lao-speaking people from the left bank of the Mekong River (modern Laos) into Isan in Northeastern Thailand. These relocations depopulated rebellious areas and secured Siam's eastern frontier while reshaping the cultural and demographic landscape of the region. In Isan, Lao-speaking communities retained much of their linguistic, religious, and cultural identity, but over time, they blended into the Siamese state through policies of assimilation, including language and education reforms. Meanwhile, in Laos, the legacy of Lan Xang became central to the national identity, symbolized by landmarks like Pha That Luang. This separation marked the first distinct divergence between Lao identity in Laos and Isan, where hybrid cultural traditions emerged, reflecting adaptation under Siamese influence. Simms, *The Kingdoms of Laos*, 107-125.

decisively crushed by King Rama III, and the aftermath saw the further consolidation of Siamese control over Isan. The rebellion also gave rise to the legend of Thao Suranari (Lady Mo), a heroic figure from Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima), who is said to have played a pivotal role in thwarting Anouvong's forces. Korat, located at the boundary between central Thailand and Isan, became a symbolic site of Siamese resilience and a hybrid city that embodied both Lao and central Thai influences.[88] These events solidified the annexation of Isan into the Siamese state and marked a turning point in its trajectory toward integration. This evidenced the beginning of a more deliberate campaign of cultural assimilation in the Isan region, as Siamese authorities sought to transform Isan's Lao-speaking population into loyal subjects of a centralized Thai state through the imposition of language, rituals, and historical narratives aligned with Thainess.

The Siamese state employed a range of policies to assimilate the Lao-speaking population of Isan into the broader framework of Thai national identity. Language standardization was a key focus, with the central Thai dialect promoted as the national language through schools and government institutions.[89] Buddhist reforms further reinforced this assimilation, as Siamese authorities emphasized a unified Theravada tradition that aligned with central Thai practices. Infrastructure projects, including the construction of railways and roads, linked Isan more closely to Bangkok, facilitating economic integration while also enabling greater cultural

[88] Grabowsky, "The Isan up to Its Integration into the Siamese State."

[89] R. Alexander and Duncan McCargo. "Diglossia and Identity in Northeast Thailand: Linguistic, Social, and Political Hierarchy," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18, no. 1 (2014): 60–86.

homogenization.[90] These measures disrupted traditional power structures and reduced the influence of local elites, consolidating Siamese control over the region.

Despite these assimilation efforts, Isan retained strong ties to its Lan Xang heritage, preserving distinct cultural practices that continue to define the region today. Folk music, particularly *Mor Lam*, remains a cornerstone of Isan's cultural identity, blending traditional Lao melodies with Thai influences.[91] Similarly, Lao cuisine, known for its vibrant flavors and use of sticky rice, has become a defining feature of the region's culinary landscape.[92] While the use of

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[90] S. J. Tambiah, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1971): 551-567.

[91] Suparak Hanphakdee and Thananan Suwannasophon, "Literacy Transmission of Isan Lam's Melodies to Inherit MoLam," *International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences* 17, no. 2 (2023): 69-73; Chaiyan Chotiwong, "The Modernization of Isan Folk Performance (Morlum)," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Humanities, Literature and Education*, Bangkok, 2015; Suthep Somchan, "The Isan Folk Music: Influence on Human Changes," *Nakhon Phanom University* Journal 11, no. 1 (2021): 204-211.

[92] Isan food and Lao identity are deeply intertwined, reflecting shared cultural and historical roots between Northeastern Thailand and Laos. Characterized by bold, rustic flavors, Isan cuisine features staples such as *khao niew* (sticky rice), *som tam* (papaya salad), and *larb* (spiced minced meat salad), which have their origins in traditional Lao cooking. The widespread use of fermented ingredients like *pla ra* (fermented fish) and the emphasis on grilling and raw preparations further highlight the influence of Lao culinary traditions. Isan food embodies a communal eating culture, with dishes designed for sharing and emphasizing simplicity and resourcefulness, traits reflective of the region's agrarian lifestyle. The shared culinary practices between Isan and Laos suggest their cultural kinship, even as political borders and Thai national integration have shaped Isan's identity into a hybrid of Thai and Lao influences. This duality makes Isan cuisine a symbol of both cultural continuity with Laos and adaptation to the broader Thai cultural framework. James Mitchell, "Sorapet Pinyoo and the Status of 'Pleeng Luuk Tung,'" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2009): 295–321; Marin Trenk, "Das Rohe Und Das Gekochte Laab: Eine Regionale Esskultur Thailands Zwischen Aneignung Und Ausgrenzung," *Anthropos* 107, no. 1 (2012): 115–28.

the Lao dialect has diminished in some areas due to education policies favoring central Thai, it continues to serve as a marker of regional identity in many Isan communities.[93] These cultural elements highlight the enduring legacy of Lan Xang in shaping the identity of Northeastern Thailand.

King Chulalongkorn's (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) reforms aimed to centralize the kingdom, reduce the power of local elites, and modernize Siam's institutions to strengthen its sovereignty in the face of colonial pressures. The introduction of Western legal codes and the expansion of education further solidified Bangkok's position as the administrative and cultural center of the kingdom. King Chulalongkorn personally documented his exposure to Western institutions through extensive travels in Europe, observing administrative, educational, and legal systems that significantly informed his modernization efforts in Siam.[94] Official correspondence and memoranda from his reign reveal deliberate strategies to centralize governmental power, weakening traditional provincial authorities by introducing centrally appointed commissioners.[95] The establishment of the Ministry of Justice in 1892 and the subsequent overhaul of Bangkok's court system reflect direct applications of European-inspired judicial structures aimed at

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[93] Saowanee T. Alexander and Duncan McCargo, "Diglossia and Identity in Northeast Thailand: Linguistic, Social, and Political Hierarchy," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18, no. 1 (2014): 60–86; John Draper, "Towards a Curriculum for the Thai Lao of Northeast Thailand?" *Current Issues in Language Planning* 16, no. 3 (2015): 238–258.

[94] King Chulalongkorn, *The Diaries and Travel Writings of King Chulalongkorn*, NAT, accessed April 26, 2025.

[95] "Royal Correspondence and Administrative Records," *UNESCO Memory of the World Register*, accessed April 26, 2025.

standardizing legal processes and reducing corruption.[96] Administrative reforms, especially the creation of the *monthon* system[97] through royal decrees, fundamentally restructured provincial governance by directly subordinating local elites to central authorities, reinforcing Bangkok's political and cultural primacy.[98]

In the north, as Lanna integrated more closely with Siam and faced Burmese invasions, Lua communities experienced displacement and diminishing autonomy. The expansion of Siamese authority into Northern Thailand during the nineteenth century had significant implications for groups like the Lua. Siam's centralizing policies sought to integrate highland populations into the national framework, often through the imposition of tribute systems and land use regulations. Lua agricultural practices, particularly their rotational farming techniques, were

[96] "Royal Proclamations on Legal and Judicial Reforms," in *Law and Kingship in Thailand During the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, NAT, accessed April 26, 2025.

[97] The *monthon* system was a major administrative reform initiated during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aimed at centralizing and modernizing the Siamese state. Instituted formally between 1897 and 1915, the monthon (meaning "circle" or "province cluster") replaced the traditional, semi-autonomous *muang* system with a hierarchical bureaucracy controlled directly by Bangkok. Each monthon encompassed several provinces (*changwat*) and was governed by a royal commissioner (*thesaphiban*) appointed by the central government. This system sought to eliminate local hereditary rulers, standardize taxation, and extend Siamese sovereignty over peripheral regions such as the North (formerly Lanna), the Northeast (Isan), and the South. The monthon reforms were foundational in transforming Siam into a modern nation-state, reinforcing state control over diverse ethnic populations and reshaping the political geography of what would become modern Thailand. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 87–92.

[98] "Royal Decrees on Administrative Reorganization," in *Rattanakosin Kingdom* (1782–1932) NAT.

increasingly viewed as incompatible with the state's vision of land productivity.[99] These pressures, coupled with the growing demand for labor and forest resources, further marginalized the Lua within the socio-political hierarchy of the region.

The Tai Lue were subjected to systematic forced migration into Northern Siam during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These movements intensified during the reigns of King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) and King Rama III (r. 1824–1851), as the early Chakri rulers sought to repopulate depopulated areas in the wake of continuous warfare with Burma and regional instability. Lanna rulers under Siamese suzerainty captured and resettled Tai Lue villagers into frontier regions like Chiang Rai, Nan, and Phayao as part of labor tribute (phrai luang) systems.[100] These relocations were both strategic and symbolic, designed to secure the northern frontier while demonstrating the Chakri dynasty's consolidation of power. By the time of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) and his Monthon Thesaphiban administrative reforms (1897–1915), Tai Lue communities were further integrated into Siam's provincial bureaucracies and subjected to policies promoting Thai language, standardized education, and the central Buddhist hierarchy (Thammayut sect).[101] These newly established "imagined communities"

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[99] Christopher Paik and Jessica Vechbanyongratana, "Path to Centralization and Development: Evidence from Siam," *World Politics* 71, no. 2 (2019): 289–331; Corey L. Bechtel, "*Policies of Marginalization & Integration: Southeast Asian Hill Tribes and the Thai State*," accessed December 15, 2024.

[100] Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 36, 38.

[101] Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 104-106.

became model subjects of the expanding nation-state, peripheral in origin but increasingly reframed through the homogenizing lens of Thainess.[102]

The Shan faced a similar pattern of displacement and assimilation throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Waves of Shan migration accelerated during the colonial era, particularly after the British annexation of Upper Burma in 1885, which destabilized the Shan States through forced labor, taxation, and military suppression. Shan groups fleeing from Burmese incursions and later the rise of opium-linked insurgencies in the 1940s–1970s crossed into Thailand's northwestern highlands, where they were informally resettled by Thai authorities.[103]

During the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–1925), and more critically under Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (r. 1938–1944; 1948–1957), the Thai state promoted an aggressively nationalist program that sought to assimilate Shan migrants by discouraging the use of Shan script, suppressing non-central Thai rituals, and establishing Border Patrol Police

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[102] Anderson's concept refers to the way nations are socially constructed through shared narratives, education, and state institutions. In the Thai context, peripheral groups—such as highland minorities and Lao-speaking Isan communities—were recast as loyal Thai subjects through schooling, administrative incorporation, and symbols of the monarchy, despite their distinct histories and regional identities. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6–7.

[103] Conflicts between the Burmese and Siamese kingdoms, along with internal strife within the Shan States, prompted waves of Shan migration into the Lanna region. Seeking refuge from warfare, forced labor, and political instability, many Shan settled in remote highland areas, such as Mae Hong Son, where they could maintain their traditional way of life. Mae Hong Son became a stronghold of Shan culture, with its population dominated by Shan communities who brought their language, customs, and architectural styles to the region. Tadayoshi Murakami, "Buddhism on the Border: Shan Buddhism and Transborder Migration in Northern Thailand," in *De-institutionalizing Religion in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tatsuki Kataoka, *Southeast Asian Studies* 1, no. 3 (2012): 365–393.

schools in rural Shan villages.[104] These policies were heightened during the Cold War (1950s–1980s), when the Thai government viewed borderland ethnic minorities as both potential communist sympathizers and security threats. The Shan were incorporated into imagined state-loyal communities, that is, communities defined not by their lived social realities or self-identification, but by the state's idealized vision of loyal, culturally assimilated subjects who were expected to align with Thai nationalism, Buddhism, and monarchical authority; they were granted selective access to development programs, while still denied citizenship, mobility, and full recognition within the national framework.

The integration of these communities into the centralized Thai state was uneven and often coercive. The *Monthon Thesaphiban* system of the 20th century further dismantled traditional leadership structures, imposed Bangkok-appointed administrators upon highland regions, and advanced cultural Thaification through language, religion, and dress codes. The *Monthon Thesaphiban* system was a major administrative reform implemented by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to centralize and modernize Siam's governance structure. Introduced between 1897 and 1915, this system replaced the traditional semi-autonomous rule of local lords (*chao muang*) with a bureaucratic hierarchy directly controlled by the Bangkok-based monarchy. The country was reorganized into "*monthon*" (circles), each comprising several provinces (*changwat*), overseen by appointed officials loyal to the central government. The *Thesaphiban* system aimed to assert greater control over peripheral and ethnically diverse regions, especially in the north and northeast where polities like Lanna

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[104] Thak Chaloemtiarana, "Are We Them? Textual and Literary Representations of the Chinese in Twentieth-Century Thailand," *Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 3 (2014): 473–526; Sinae Hyun, "Indigenizing the Cold War: Nation-Building by the Border Patrol Police of Thailand, 1945–1980," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 29, no. 1 (2014): 1–30.

and Lao-speaking territories had previously enjoyed considerable autonomy. This administrative overhaul was part of a broader effort to strengthen Siam's sovereignty and resist colonial encroachment while also laying the groundwork for a unified Thai national identity. However, for many ethnic minority groups in the highlands and borderlands, the *Thesaphiban* system marked the beginning of intensified state intervention, loss of traditional leadership, and pressure to assimilate into the central Thai cultural framework.[105] Nevertheless, major ethnic minority communities demonstrated flexibility, selectively adopting elements of Thai identity while safeguarding their heritage.

The Complications of World War II and Later

World War II introduced a new set of complications into the Thai state's evolving relationship with ethnic and regional minorities. Following Japan's invasion in December 1941 and Thailand's subsequent alliance with the Axis powers, the Thai government, then under the leadership of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, pursued an aggressive program of cultural nationalism. While this alliance with Japan was portrayed as a strategic move to reclaim "lost territories" in French Indochina, it also reinforced internal policies that prioritized certain ethno-regional identities over others. The Central Thai identity, already the ideological core of the nation, was further elevated through state propaganda, educational reforms, and administrative restructuring. In the north, the Khon Muang (Lanna) population, despite their historical autonomy, were reimagined as "northern Thai," compatible with the dominant vision of

[105] Akiko Iijima, "The Invention of 'Isan' History," *Journal of the Siam Society* 106 (2018): 49–67.

Thainess.[106] Similarly, in the northeast, Lao-speaking Isan communities were selectively included in the national narrative, albeit with linguistic and cultural rebranding to erase their association with Laos.[107]

This strategic embrace of lowland identities that could be molded into Thainess stood in sharp contrast to the treatment of highland ethnic groups. Highlanders such as the Hmong, Akha, Mien, and Lahu, many of whom maintained transborder connections with British Burma, French Indochina, or southern China, were viewed with suspicion by the central state. Their geographic mobility, spiritual autonomy, and linguistic differences made them appear foreign and potentially disloyal, especially in a wartime climate dominated by security concerns and racialized nationalism. Japanese advisors stationed in northern Thailand occasionally supported the Thai state's suspicion of highland communities, viewing them as politically unreliable and culturally incompatible with modern Asian state-building efforts. These perceptions dovetailed with existing internal discourses that associated hill tribes with backwardness, opium cultivation, and foreignness.[108] As a result, highland populations were left outside the wartime nationalist

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[106] Thamsook Numnonda, "Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941–1945," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (September 1976): 193–206.

[107] Saowanee T. Alexander and Duncan McCargo, "Diglossia and Identity in Northeast Thailand: Linguistic, Social, and Political Hierarchy," 60–83; Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom, "Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of Politics and Identity in Northeast Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity* 5, no. 2 (2004): 219–234.

[108] John A. Buchanan, *From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localization of a Global Movement in Thailand*, PhD diss., University of Washington, 2013; Ian G. Baird, "Millenarian Movements and the Politics of Ethnic Identity among the Hmong in Thailand," *Asian Ethnology* 72, no. 1 (2013): 1–30; Hjorleifur Jonsson, "Phantom Scandal: On the National Uses of the 'Thailand Controversy'," unpublished manuscript, 2010.

imaginary and excluded from many development or relief programs that were extended to lowland communities.

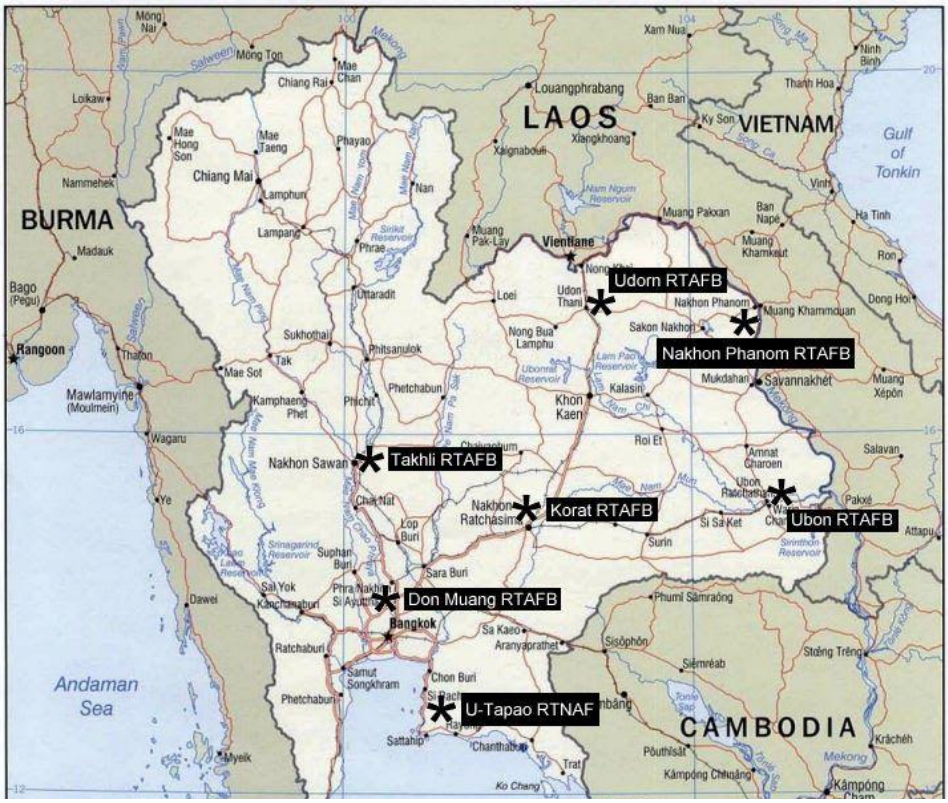
The wartime context also disrupted the fragile pluralism that had existed in the borderlands. Highlanders found themselves squeezed between imperial forces and emerging nationalist projects. In regions such as Chiang Rai, Nan, and Mae Hong Son, Thai and Japanese authorities jointly increased patrols and surveillance, treating highland settlements as potential hotbeds of foreign espionage or communist infiltration. This heightened scrutiny helped establish long-term patterns of exclusion that persisted into the Cold War, as highland communities were not only neglected in infrastructure development but actively discouraged from practicing their traditions. Meanwhile, state-led programs in education and Buddhism were selectively extended to Khon Muang and Isan populations, further embedding them into the national framework. This uneven incorporation during World War II solidified a hierarchy of inclusion that shaped postwar state policies, one that favored assimilable lowland groups and marginalized highland peoples as perpetual outsiders, a dynamic that intensified during the Cold War's ideological polarization.

By the end of World War II, the effects of earlier policies, forced migration, cultural suppression, and militarization, had left a profound imprint on both non central region lowland and highland communities. These populations, often portrayed as peripheral to the Thai nation, were in fact deeply entangled in its political and territorial formation. Far from being passive recipients of state policy, many ethnic minorities asserted their cultural autonomy and adapted creatively to shifting political realities. Their presence complicates conventional lowland-centered narratives of Thai state formation, revealing how the highlands functioned as spaces of contestation and negotiation.

The onset of the Cold War brought new urgency to the Thai state's interest in upland borderlands. Highland regions, once loosely governed, became zones of intense strategic concern, due in part to their proximity to Laos, Burma, and China. These areas were increasingly framed as national security frontiers, leading to heightened state surveillance, the expansion of road infrastructure, and military outposts. Local communities were often caught between state forces and transnational insurgent movements, including communist resistance groups that capitalized on the highlands' remoteness and ethnic diversity. This strategic recalibration is vividly illustrated in the 1969 U.S. Army map of military installations across Thailand, which reveals the dense concentration of bases along the northern and northeastern frontiers.[109] These cartographic records suggest how the Thai and U.S. governments transformed highland spaces into militarized zones, embedding infrastructure and surveillance systems that permanently altered the socio-political fabric of upland communities.

[109] United States Air Force, 652nd Topographic Engineer Battalion, *U.S. Installations and Facilities in Thailand*, November 1, 1969, map, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, https://blogs.loc.gov/maps/2019/08/u-s-bases-in-thailand-during-the-vietnam-war-and-agent-orange/.

During and after WWII, Thailand saw an influx of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese refugees—some escaping colonial repression in French Indochina, others fleeing civil war in China. Many settled in highland and peripheral areas, where they contributed to commerce, agriculture, and local governance; however, their presence was also met with suspicion. The Thai state often viewed these migrant communities through a lens of political anxiety, particularly as communist movements gained momentum in neighboring countries. As such, Chinese and Vietnamese settlers were subject to both economic integration and cultural scrutiny, facing pressures to adopt Thai language, names, and norms. This dual process of economic reliance and



Map 2: U.S. and Thai Military Installations across Thailand, circa 1969.

This map highlights the concentration of bases along the northern and northeastern frontiers, including key locations such as Udorn RTAFB, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, and Ubon RTAFB. These installations underscore the strategic emphasis placed on these regions during the Vietnam War era, reflecting the geopolitical priorities of the time. Source: United States Air Force, "USAF Base in Thailand during the Vietnam War," Air Force Academy, accessed May 9, 2025.

cultural suspicion is reflected in the 1939 Thai government decrees mandating name changes, language adoption, and school enrollment for Chinese immigrants, legal mechanisms that enforced assimilation under the guise of national unity. As Tong Chee Kiong's study shows, these measures were not merely symbolic but shaped the socio-political position of Sino-Thai people for decades, fostering a conditional form of inclusion tied to the erasure of distinct ethnic identity.[110]

For the highlanders —such as the Karen, Hmong, Lua, and others—this era marked a dramatic shift in how they were governed. Once loosely autonomous, these communities were now incorporated into state development schemes, counterinsurgency operations, and population control measures. While some groups aligned with state interests by serving as guides, paramilitary auxiliaries, or participants in opium suppression campaigns, others were stigmatized as subversive or criminal. State development programs like the Hill Tribe Welfare Program and Land Allocation Schemes, often funded with U.S. Cold War aid, sought to both pacify and assimilate highland populations. Hans Manndorff's fieldwork further reveals how welfare and land initiatives, such as the provision of medical services, schooling, and resettlement programs, were framed as modernization but functioned primarily to bring highland groups under state surveillance and bureaucratic control. By documenting the increased presence of government agents, road construction, and the imposition of administrative structures in formerly autonomous villages, Manndorff illustrates how these development schemes operated as tools of

[110] Chee Kiong Tong, *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

national identity formation, assimilating highland peoples into the framework of Thai citizenship and Thainess.[111]

With the rise of Cold War geopolitics, highland populations were subjected to new forms of ideological policing. Loyalty to the Thai nation was measured not only through political alignment but also through cultural assimilation: speaking central Thai, participating in state rituals, and adopting "civilized" dress and customs. Schools and border patrol police stations became agents of Thaification, while highland religious practices were reinterpreted or discouraged in favor of state-sanctioned Buddhism or "modern" practices.[112] These efforts to cultivate loyalty blurred the line between inclusion and coercion, often reducing cultural difference to a matter of national threat, which in turn heightened tensions with highland communities. As development initiatives increasingly treated highland identities as security risks, hill tribes faced surveillance, resettlement, and the erosion of cultural autonomy. Framed as potential conduits of communism or foreign influence, many groups were forcibly relocated, subjected to Thai-language education, and pressured to abandon traditional agricultural and spiritual practices. These policies not only disrupted everyday life but also created deep mistrust

[111] Hans Manndorff, "The Hill Tribe Program of The Public Welfare Department, Ministry of Interior, Thailand: Research and Socio-economic Development," in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations, Volume 2*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 525–552.

[112] United States Information Agency, *Communism or Freedom* [Anti-Communist Propaganda Posters Distributed in Thailand]. 1965–1968. U.S. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/resource/asianscd.2022655032v11/?st=gallery; Royal Thai Government. *Legal Regulation of Communist Activities in Thailand*. Bangkok: Government Gazette, 1967. U.S. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/2019668353/.

toward the state, laying the groundwork for both resistance and reluctant accommodation, dynamics explored further in the chapters that follow.

Lowland sites like Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima) became emblematic of this broader effort to bridge ethnic and regional divides. Already mythologized in Thai national memory through the legend of Thao Suranari, Korat symbolized the successful integration of Lao-speaking Isan populations into the Siamese state.[113] Thus, Korat served as both a geopolitical and symbolic frontier, a liminal space between the Lao-speaking Isan region and the Central Thai heartland. As the first major provincial city east of the central plains, Korat historically functioned as a buffer zone during Siamese expansion and state consolidation, particularly in the early 19th century when fears of Lao rebellion were acute. The city's elevation of Thao Suranari as a heroic figure

[113] Thao Suranari, also known as Khun Ying Mo or Yamo, is a celebrated folk heroine of Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) whose legend has become a powerful symbol of northeastern loyalty to the Thai state. According to popular accounts, during Chao Anouvong's Laotian rebellion of 1826–1828, Khun Ying Mo, wife of the provincial governor, organized a strategic resistance against invading Lao forces, delaying them until Siamese troops could arrive. Though her role is not mentioned in royal chronicles, her story was later elevated into national consciousness, especially after the erection of her statue in 1934 during the nationalist reforms of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram. This state-sponsored memorialization transformed her into a symbol of patriotic virtue and female heroism, reinforcing the message that Lao-speaking Isan populations were loyal and integral to the Thai nation. In subsequent decades, Thao Suranari has been celebrated not only through monuments and public rituals but also through her incorporation into popular culture and beauty pageants, where she serves as a regional icon reimagined through the lens of Thai unity and cultural assimilation. Maurizio Peleggi, *Monumental Failures: Selections from the Royal Chronicles of the Third Reign* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 186; *Chiang Khaeng Chronicle*, unpublished manuscript, Local History Archives, Chiang Mai University Library; Charles F. Keyes, "National Heroine or Local Spirit? The Struggle over Memory in the Case of Thao Suranari of Nakhon Ratchasima," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, eds. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 113–136; Saipin Kaewngamprasert, *Kanmuang nai anusawari Thao Suranari* [The Politics of the Thao Suranari Monument] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995).

embodies this intermediary role: her legend represents not just local resistance, but the successful integration and assimilation of a peripheral, ethnically Lao region into the Thai national narrative. Through monuments, festivals, and state patronage, Korat embodied the narrative of loyalty and transformation, projecting an image of Isan as culturally distinct yet faithfully Thai. This made it a potent site where regional identity was visibly framed through the lens of patriotic Thainess. During the Cold War, Korat also served as a forward base for military operations in the Northeast.[114] This dual role—cultural hybrid and strategic bastion—reflected the Thai state's broader ambition to transform its peripheries into integral, loyal components of the national body.

By the mid-twentieth century, ethnic diversity had ceased to be a marginal issue; it was now a core concern of national governance. The post-WWII state treated cultural and linguistic variation not as benign, but as a challenge to territorial unity. In this context, state policies shifted from tolerance to active assimilation. Language instruction, dress codes, and administrative reclassification all served to reduce visible signs of ethnic difference. The highlands, once framed as remote and "other," became a crucible where competing visions of Thai modernity, identity, and citizenship played out with lasting consequences.

Geography, Difference, and the Uneven Foundations of Thainess

The history of lowland and highland groups of Thailand is a testament to the region's dynamic and multi-ethnic past, shaped by a confluence of indigenous traditions, external

[114] 652nd Topographic Engineer Battalion, *Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base Historical Brief*, November 1, 1969, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, https://www.vdha.us/stuff/contentmgr/files/0/35f0402601df312756dbf5609d032423/docs/korat_historical_brief.pdf; Tourism Authority of Thailand, "Thao Suranari Monument," accessed April 20, 2025, https://www.tourismthailand.org/Attraction/thao-suranari-monument.

influences, and evolving political structures. From the Dvaravati period to the Rattanakosin era and eventually WWII, the story of each ethnic group in Thailand reflects a continuous process of cultural integration, assimilation, adaptation, and transformation. While dominant narratives have traditionally centered on the Central Thai and the formation of the Siamese state, this chapter highlights the importance of lesser-recognized groups and regional histories in shaping the identity of the modern nation. The interplay between ethnic diversity and political centralization suggests the complex paths that led to the emergence of Thainess as both an inclusive and a contested concept.

Throughout history, highland-lowland dynamics have been defined by interdependence, particularly in trade, agriculture, and cultural exchange. While highland groups provided forest goods and agricultural products, lowlanders supplied necessary commodities, creating a mutual, albeit unequal, relationship. However, as the Thai state expanded its reach during the 19th and 20th centuries, this delicate balance shifted. Nation-building initiatives and environmental conservation policies disrupted traditional highland livelihoods, leading to land conflicts, forced assimilation, and a reclassification of highlanders as outsiders or "hill tribes."[115] These policies reinforced stereotypes that continue to influence public perceptions and policy frameworks.

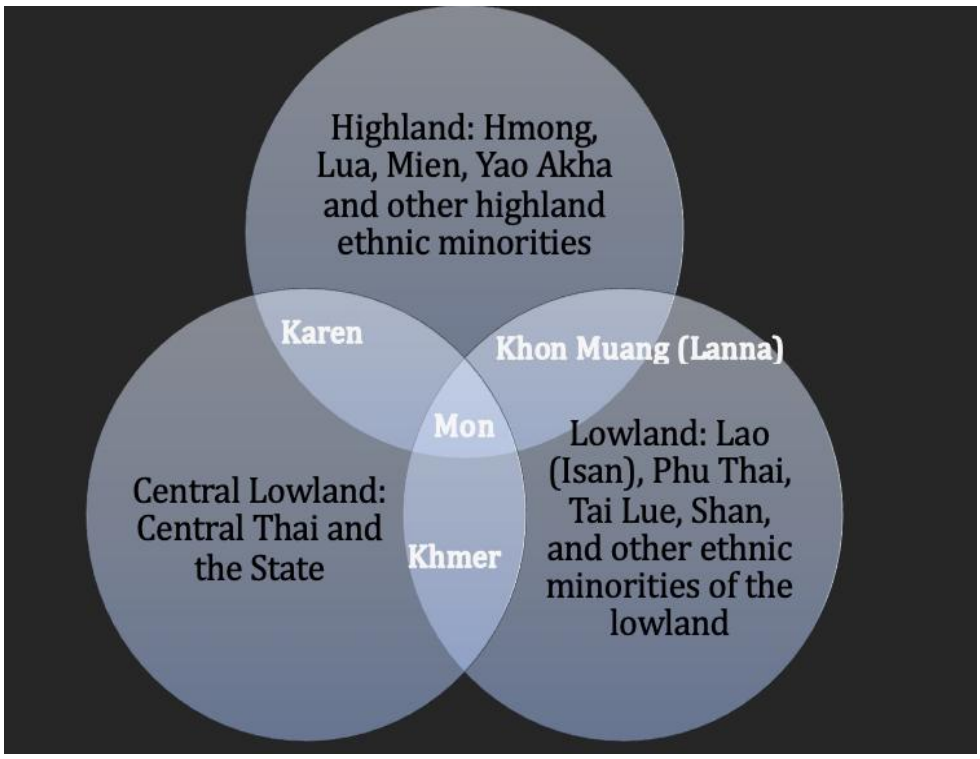
One of the defining features of Thailand's historical trajectory is the comparatively rapid adoption and assimilation of elements associated with Thainess by its diverse ethnic groups. The proximity of the lowlands to centers of political power such as Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and eventually the Rattanakosin-period Bangkok, facilitated this process of Thaification, wherein the central Thai language, Buddhism, and lowland cultural norms were adopted by lowland ethnic

[115] Reiner Buergin, *"Hill Tribes" and Forests: Minority Policies and Resource Conflicts in Thailand*, SEFUT Working Paper No. 7 (Freiburg: University of Freiburg, 2000).

minorities like the Mon, Laos, and Phu Thai among others. The relatively accessible geography of the lowland plains, with its expansive river systems and trade networks, allowed for sustained contact between peripheral communities and the ruling polities. Through trade, intermarriage, and religious patronage, lowland ethnic groups became part of a shared cultural and economic system, which was reinforced by the administrative and religious reforms of successive Thai states. Unlike highland groups, lowland ethnic groups enjoyed more profitable integration into central Thai society.

Many lowland groups, such as the Thai Isan or the Tai Lue in the north, actively incorporated elements of Thainess into their existing traditions, blending their regional identities with those promoted by the Siamese state. In some cases, the adoption of Thai cultural practices was pragmatic, offering social or economic advantages such as access to political patronage or trade opportunities. For others, the centrality of Theravada Buddhism as a shared religious framework made assimilation a natural process. The Thai state's promotion of Buddhism as a unifying force helped to smooth the integration of diverse groups, particularly as Buddhist temples became centers for education, economic activity, and social cohesion. The willingness to adopt aspects of Thai identity distinguished the lowland assimilation experience from that of the highlands, where geographic and cultural isolation fostered a more resistant dynamic.

The highlands of Thailand, by contrast, remain a stark counterpoint to the lowlands in their historical narratives and trajectories of assimilation. As subsequent chapters will explore, the rugged terrain of the highlands created physical and cultural barriers that limited interaction with lowland Thai polities. Ethnic groups in the highlands, such as the Karen, Hmong, Akha, and Lua, developed distinct social and cultural systems that were less influenced by the central Thai state until the mid-20th century. The limited reach of administrative reforms and the challenges


Highland: Hmong, Lua, Mien, Yao Akha and other highland ethnic minorities
Karen
Khon Muang (Lanna)
Mon
Central Lowland: Central Thai and the State
Khmer
Lowland: Lao (Isan), Phu Thai, Tai Lue, Shan, and other ethnic minorities of the lowland
Figure 1: Venn Diagram of Ethnic Relations in Thailand.

This Venn diagram offers a conceptual visualization of Thailand's ethnic and regional complexity, aligning with the broader arguments of the chapter. This diagram illustrates how various ethnic groups occupy cultural and geographic intersections between the Central Lowland, Highland, and Peripheral Lowland zones such as the Northeast. The central overlap, where groups like the Mon and Khmer appear, signifies their historical roles as cultural intermediaries as well as their partial incorporation into Thai national identity. The Karen, though highland-based, have links with central and peripheral lowlands, while the Khon Muang reflect the distinctiveness of northern lowland groups with their own historical trajectories. This diagram reinforces the critique of a monolithic Thai identity by showing that Thainess emerged not from cultural uniformity but from overlapping, contested, and negotiated spaces involving diverse ethnic groups across geographical terrains. It visually challenges the central-state narrative of uniform assimilation by revealing the layered and intersectional realities of regional identities.

of imposing centralized control in mountainous regions meant that highland communities retained a greater degree of autonomy and cultural distinction for much of their history. This geographical separation, combined with divergent livelihoods and religious practices, set the highlands apart from the Thaification processes that defined the lowlands.

The contrasting experiences of lowland and highland groups suggest the importance of geography in shaping patterns of assimilation and cultural integration. The lowland ethnic groups' proximity to urban centers and their involvement in trade and agricultural economies tied them more directly to the political and cultural projects of the Thai state. In contrast, the highland communities, often reliant on subsistence agriculture and separated by challenging terrain, operated on the periphery of state power, engaging with lowland societies primarily through trade and occasional conflict. This separation led to distinct historical narratives, with the highlands emerging as spaces of resistance and cultural preservation, while the lowlands became sites of integration and transformation.

As Thailand continues to grapple with questions of cultural diversity and national unity, the histories of its lowland and highland ethnic groups offer valuable insights into the dynamics of assimilation and identity formation. The lowland narrative reveals a story of interconnectedness and integration, where geography and proximity to power facilitated the adoption of Thainess. The highland narrative, by contrast, underscores the role of isolation and resistance in preserving distinct identities. Together, these histories form a more complete picture of the forces that shaped Thailand's development, demonstrating the interplay between unity and diversity in the construction of the Thai nation. This synthesis sets the stage for the next chapter, which will delve into highland ethnic groups and their unique experiences, illustrating how geography and culture have shaped divergent paths in Thailand's history.

CHAPTER 2: NATIONAL LESSONS: ETHNIC MINORITITES AND THE EDUCAITON OF THAI IDENTITY, 1945-1980

In the aftermath of World War II, Thailand's urgent need to rebuild its economy and reinforce national cohesion led to a growing recognition of education as a strategic tool for state consolidation. Education became central to the post-war imagination of the Thai state, serving both developmental and ideological purposes. The government launched a series of reforms that not only aimed to expand educational access and reduce illiteracy but also sought to assimilate ethnic minorities into a homogenized national identity. The National Education Plan of 1960 was a cornerstone of these efforts, introducing universal primary education as a state mandate and embedding the values of Thainess, defined by loyalty to the monarchy, Theravada Buddhism, and the Thai language, into school curricula.[116] By extending state schooling into remote and ethnically diverse regions, the Thai state attempted to standardize cultural norms and linguistic practices, particularly among minority populations in the northern highlands and northeastern lowlands.

However, these reforms were implemented unevenly. The centralized, top-down nature of Thai educational planning often clashed with the heterogeneous realities of local communities. In highland areas, where ethnic groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Lisu maintained distinct linguistic and cultural traditions, the imposition of Thai-language instruction and Buddhist-oriented curricula frequently encountered resistance. Similarly, in the northeastern region of Isan, despite shared Buddhist practices, Lao-speaking populations resisted full cultural assimilation

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[116] J.K. Watson, "A conflict of Nationalism: The Chinese and Education in Thailand, 1900-1960," *Paedagogica Historica* 16, no. 2 (1976): 429-451; Gerald W. Fry and Hui Bi, "The Evolution of Educational Reform in Thailand: The Thai Educational Paradox," in *Journal of Educational Administration* 51, no 3 (2013): 290-319.

due to regional loyalties and linguistic differences. The 1974 Education for Life and Society Act, which emphasized practical skills and localized content, attempted to address some of these discrepancies.[117] Yet, it still operated within a national framework that prioritized unity over diversity. As a result, while education played a pivotal role in state-building, it also exposed the limitations of assimilation policies that failed to meaningfully accommodate regional and ethnic particularities.

Education has long been a central tool in shaping the idea of the nation in Thailand, functioning as a means to promote a unified national identity while often marginalizing or assimilating ethnic minority cultures. From the mid-20th century, government-run education systems emphasized the teaching of the central Thai language, history, and Buddhist values, aiming to cultivate a singular Thai national consciousness.[118] This top-down approach frequently overlooked the linguistic and cultural diversity of minority groups in both lowland and highland regions, encouraging children to adopt a Thai identity aligned with the nation-state's ideals.[119] As a result, education became a site of both cultural transmission and cultural erasure, with

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[117] Waraiporn Sangnaparoworn, "Part III Case Studies in Southeast Asia," n.d. https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Reports/InterimReport/2005/pdf/2005_04_15_07.pdf.

[118] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Charles F. Keyes, "Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State," in *Buddhism and Nation-State in Asia*, ed. Michael Jerryson (London: Routledge, 1995), 127–48.

[119] David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009); Duncan McCargo, *Political Transition in Thailand: Democracy and Participation* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

minority children facing pressure to abandon their mother tongues and traditional practices in favor of a standardized national curriculum.[120]

However, alternative educational spaces, such as community-run or ethnic-based schools, have played a critical role in preserving ethnic identity amidst the pressures of assimilation. For example, in highland areas where ethnic groups like the Karen or Lua operate their own schools, instruction often integrates native languages and cultural values alongside Thai language learning.[121] This dual approach fosters a more pluralistic understanding of nationhood, allowing minority students to navigate both their ethnic heritage and their place within the Thai state. These contrasting educational experiences illustrate how the nation is not a fixed or homogeneous concept but rather one negotiated through everyday practices, highlighting the contested and multilayered nature of Thai nationalism in diverse ethnic contexts.[122]

This chapter argues that in the 1960s and 1970s, the Thai education system was a central pillar of state-led assimilation, with a particular focus on integrating highland ethnic minorities into a unified national framework. Recognizing the perceived threat posed by cultural heterogeneity in the highlands, Thai policymakers increasingly targeted these regions for

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[120] Monique Skidmore, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008); David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[121] Charles F. Keyes, *Ethnic Tourism and Thai Society: From Politics to Performance and Back* (London: Routledge, 2013); Don McCaskill and Udomsak Kampe, *The Karen People of Thailand: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997).

[122] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Charles Hirschman, "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States," *International Migration Review* 40, no. 4 (2006): 1068–91.

educational intervention. However, despite their strategic importance, the outcomes of these reforms were uneven. Geographic remoteness, rugged terrain, and limited infrastructure severely hindered the state's ability to implement educational programs effectively in highland areas. By contrast, lowland regions, more accessible and closer to the central administrative apparatus, saw more consistent school establishment and stronger institutional presence despite less interest from the central government. While education reforms were explicitly designed to inculcate Thainess across the national landscape, their practical impact remained regionally differentiated. Drawing on case studies from Charles F. Keyes and official data from the Ministry of Education, this chapter explores how schools in highland areas became not only tools of state power but also fragile and often contested arenas of cultural negotiation, where ethnic minority communities navigated the pressures of assimilation under constrained and uneven conditions.

Education, Nationalism, and the Management of Diversity: A Comparative Framework

Jia Yang Neoh's comparative study on citizenship and democratic education in Australia and Singapore during periods of heightened nationalism provides a useful framework for understanding the role of education in managing diversity within nationalist projects. Neoh argues that educational systems in both states were designed not only to transmit civic knowledge but to cultivate loyal national subjects amid growing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity.[123] This insight parallels Thailand's post-WWII educational reforms, which similarly sought to instill a sense of Thainess and national unity, especially during the Cold War period. Neoh's work highlights how modern states deploy schooling to produce national

[123] Jia Y. Neoh, "Citizenship and Democratic Education in the Time of Rising Nationalism: Implications for Citizenship Education from the Cases of Australia and Singapore," *Citizenship Teaching & Learning* 16, no. 3 (October 2021): 361–379.

cohesion while suppressing minority distinctiveness, a theme central to Thailand's education policies in the mid-twentieth century.

David B. Tyack's classic work Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society further contextualizes Thailand's educational nationalism within a broader global pattern. Tyack illustrates how public schools in multiethnic societies often became contested spaces where state authorities negotiated cultural pluralism and national conformity.[124] In Thailand, this tension was evident in the state's attempts to integrate diverse ethnic minorities, particularly those in the northern highlands and northeastern lowlands, into a singular Thai identity through national curricula, language policies, and state-sponsored civic rituals. Tyack's findings affirm that schooling in Thailand functioned as a mechanism of internal colonization, aimed at marginalizing minority identities in favor of centralized state narratives.

Bherrio Dwi Saputra, Mukhamad Murdiono, and Entoh Tohani's systematic literature review on nationalism education in elementary schools underscores how curricula worldwide often reinforce nationalist ideologies at the expense of cultural diversity.[125] Their research demonstrates that elementary education is especially critical in cultivating early nationalist sentiment, with textbooks and school rituals serving as vehicles for state ideology. This observation is highly relevant to Thailand's own practices from 1945 to 1980, where state-prescribed textbooks and classroom routines propagated loyalty to the monarchy, Theravada

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[124] David B. Tyack, *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 67.

[125] Bherrio Dwi Saputra, Mukhamad Murdiono, and Entoh Tohani, "Nationalism Education in Elementary School: A Systematic Literature Review," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 12, no. 2 (2023): 1–20, esp. 5–6.

Buddhism, and national unity, while downplaying ethnic minority cultures. The review situates Thailand's educational nationalism within a wider Southeast Asian and global phenomenon.

The introduction to the special issue *Return of the Nation: Education in an Era of Rising Nationalism and Populism*, Nelli Piattoeva, Sofia Viseu, and Jitka Wirthová offers valuable insight into the resurgence of nationalist education policies in diverse modern states. The authors argue that schools often become battlegrounds where national identities are constructed and defended, particularly in times of political tension or cultural anxiety.[126] Their findings resonate with Thailand's mid-twentieth-century experience, where schools in both lowland and highland regions became key instruments for advancing Thaification policies. By situating Thailand's educational reforms within this broader trend, their work reinforces the argument that education's political function is central to the process of nation-building.

Mehak Sheikh and Joel R. Anderson's systematic literature review on the education and acculturation of refugees and asylum seekers sheds light on how state education systems typically promote assimilation while offering limited space for cultural pluralism. Their study highlights the difficulties faced by displaced populations in accessing education that respects their cultural heritage.[127] In Thailand, these dynamics were especially pronounced in the northern and northeastern regions, where Indochinese refugees and highland minorities were pressured to adopt Thai cultural norms through compulsory education and civic training. Sheikh and

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[126] Nelli Piattoeva, Sofia Viseu, and Jitka Wirthová, "Introduction to the Special Issue 'Return of the Nation: Education in an Era of Rising Nationalism and Populism,'" *European Educational Research Journal* 22, no. 5 (September 2023): 595–606.

[127] Mehak Sheikh and Joel R. Anderson, "Acculturation Patterns and Education of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Systematic Literature Review," *Learning and Individual Differences* 67 (2018): 22–32.

Anderson's findings help explain the selective and often coercive nature of Thailand's mid-century educational integration policies.

Finally, Soo-Kyung Lee, Jeffery Sobal, and Edward A. Frongillo's comparative study on models of acculturation among Korean Americans presents a useful lens for examining similar processes in Thailand. Their research distinguishes between assimilationist and integrationist approaches, noting the psychological and social tensions that arise when minority groups are expected to abandon their cultural identities.[128] This framework is particularly relevant to understanding Thailand's highland education programs during the postwar period, where policies favored cultural assimilation over integration, often resulting in resistance and partial non-compliance from minority communities. Their study provides a comparative case that underscores the limitations of coercive assimilation through education.

Taken together, these comparative studies and literature reviews reveal how mid-twentieth century education systems in diverse societies—including Thailand—were mobilized as tools of nationalist integration, often at the expense of minority cultures and local knowledge. Like their counterparts in Singapore, Australia, and elsewhere, Thai authorities viewed schooling as a primary mechanism for cultivating national loyalty and suppressing ethnic difference. However, as these works consistently show, such top-down, assimilationist approaches frequently faltered when confronted with the complexities of local identities and traditions. This tension was particularly visible in the highland regions of northern Thailand, where educational reforms struggled to address the realities of minority communities.

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[128] Soo Kyung Lee, Jeffery Sobal, and Edward A. Frongillo, "Comparison of Models of Acculturation: The Case of Korean Americans," *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology* 34, no. 3 (May 2003): 282–296.

In the highland mountainous northern region, for instance, the reforms did not adequately address the needs and traditions of the local communities, leading to resistance and limited effectiveness. For example, ethnic Mien communities were often perceived through the lens of state-led narratives that labeled them as "unmodern," resulting in educational initiatives that failed to resonate with their cultural values and social structures. State led development agencies often dismissed the Mien and other highlanders as backward or primitive, insisted upon their transformation into proper "Thai" citizens by the 1960s.[129] This stigma led to programs that were prescriptive and top-down, ignoring the agency and knowledge systems of the Mien themselves.

Education, Thaification, and Uneven State Power in the Lowland Periphery

In the lowland northern valleys and the northeastern Isan region, education reforms struggled to achieve their intended outcomes due to a lack of infrastructure and resources. In the northeastern Isan region during the 1970s, many rural schools lacked essential infrastructure such as proper classrooms, teaching materials, and adequately trained teachers, severely undermining the goals of national education reforms. These deficiencies were documented in a 1974 report by the National Education Commission and a 1976 field survey by the Ministry of Education, both highlighting high dropout rates and poor learning outcomes in under-resourced areas.[130] This uneven implementation highlighted the complexities of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to education in a diverse nation. Thus, between 1945 and 1980, the imagination of the Thai state was marked by a strong emphasis on nationalization and Thaification. This era saw the

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[129] Nicholas Tapp, "Mien Alter-Natives in Thai Modernity," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 46, no. 3 (2002): 126–141.

[130] National Education Commission, *Educational Development Plan for the Northeastern Region* (Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister, 1974); *Ministry of Education, Field Survey on Rural Schools in Isan* (Bangkok: NAT, Ministry of Education, 1976).

creation of a modern Thai state, where the education system was used as a tool to foster a unified national identity at the expense of minority identities. The process of Thaification aimed to instill a sense of Thainess among all citizens, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds; however, the effectiveness of this process varied significantly across different regions and communities.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, the National Education Plan of 1960 aimed to universalize primary education and reduce illiteracy. Sarit, who came to power through a military coup in 1957, prioritized education as a means to promote national development and social cohesion. Alongside him, then-Minister of Education, Praphas Charusathien played a crucial role in implementing these reforms.[131] The plan extended compulsory education to six years and, for the first time, included provisions for disabled children, who had previously been exempt from compulsory education, ensuring they received some form of basic education. Additionally, the plan extended educational opportunities across the country, including into remote areas. However, the focus on creating a unified national identity through education often overlooked the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of

[131] Minister of Education Praphas Charusathien played a pivotal role in advancing the Thai state's educational reforms during the 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in aligning them with broader national security and Thaification agendas. Under his leadership, education was not only expanded in terms of infrastructure and access but also strategically reoriented as a tool for ideological consolidation. His policies prioritized the dissemination of Central Thai language, loyalty to the monarchy, and a unified national curriculum, especially in frontier and ethnically diverse regions like Isan and the northern highlands. These efforts reflected Praphas's dual position as both an education official and a military leader, bridging bureaucratic development with internal security objectives. In practice, this meant that schools—especially those run by the Border Patrol Police—functioned as instruments of cultural standardization and state surveillance, targeting minority populations perceived as politically unreliable or insufficiently Thai. Saichol Sattayanurak, "The Construction of Mainstream Thought on 'Thai Identity' and Its Impact on Education Policy During the Rule of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat," in *Modern Thai Politics*, eds. Michael Montesano et al. (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2012).

Figure 2: Propaganda Flier Depicting Two Images of Education in Thailand.

One of a teacher lecturing students under Communism, and the other students doing scientific experiments and math under freedom in 1966. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

various ethnic groups. This process, known as Thaification, sought to assimilate ethnic minorities into the dominant culture, sometimes at the expense of their own cultural identities. While significant improvements in education and literacy were reported in Bangkok, the surrounding central region, and major regional cities such as Nakhon Ratchasima in the Northeast and Chiang Mai in the North, there was little evidence of increased educational facilities and knowledge in local villages.

In 1960, the minister of education, Praphas Charusathien, was a prominent military officer and politician who played a critical role in the education reform. As Minister of the Interior and later Deputy Prime Minister under Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn, Praphas Charusathien was deeply involved in the implementation of policies aimed at promoting Thai nationalism. Thaification sought to assimilate ethnic minorities into the dominant Central Thai

culture, often at the expense of their own cultural identities. This was part of a broader strategy to foster national unity and stability in the wake of World War II.

A striking example of this Thaification strategy can be seen in Figure 2, a 1966 anti-communist propaganda flier archived by the Library of Congress. The flier, distributed by Thai state agencies, juxtaposes two images: one depicting children under communism learning in a bleak, militarized classroom, and the other showing Thai children studying in a bright, orderly environment symbolizing freedom and national prosperity.[132] The message is clear: education in the service of the Thai nation offers enlightenment and progress, while communist alternatives lead to control and misery. This visual rhetoric reflects the government's attempt to link loyalty to the monarchy and the nation with access to education, especially in the frontier regions where hill tribes were seen as vulnerable to leftist influence. Propaganda of this kind suggests the ideological dimension of education during this period: classrooms were not neutral spaces, but battlegrounds where the state sought to mold not only literate but ideologically-loyal subjects. It reveals how education reforms under Praphas Charusathien and the Sarit regime were closely tied to national security goals, using schooling as a means to consolidate political authority and suppress dissent among ethnic minorities perceived as politically suspect.

In a 1966 anti-communist propaganda flier distributed by Thai state agencies symbolizing the state's promise of prosperity through loyalty and education. This visual, archived by the Library of Congress, particularly targeting frontier and minority populations like the Phu Thai.[133]

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[132] Thailand, Ministry of Education, *Communism vs. Freedom: Learn the Difference*, 1966.

[133] Thailand, "Thailand: Anti-Communist Propaganda Flier, 1966," NAT. accessed May 24, 2024.

Such imagery reveals how education reforms were not merely developmental but deeply political, positioning schools as instruments of ideological assimilation where ethnic minority identities were subordinated to state-defined notions of Thainess. The ethnic Phu Thai, whose ancestral homeland lies in present-day Laos and northern Vietnam, share deep kinship ties across the Mekong, as many of their relatives remained in regions that later became part of communist states. Educational propaganda from that time highlights the Thai state's concern over their potential ideological alignment during the Cold War, particularly given their historical migration into Siam during the reign of King Rama III.[134] The connection between Cold War anxieties and

[134] The Phu Thai people trace their origins to areas of present-day northeastern Vietnam and central Laos, from which they began migrating westward several centuries ago. According to Chaiyasuk and Møllerup, historical patterns suggest that Phu Thai groups moved across the Mekong River into what is now northeastern Thailand (Isan) during the early Rattanakosin period, particularly under the reign of King Rama III. This migration was both voluntary and coerced, as Siamese military campaigns often resulted in the resettlement of Lao-speaking peoples into Siamese territory to bolster frontier populations and secure loyalty along contested borders. The Phu Thai retained strong linguistic and cultural ties with their relatives who remained in Laos and Vietnam, a fact that later fueled state anxieties during the Cold War, when cross-border kinship networks were seen as potential conduits for communist influence. Despite their assimilation into the Thai polity, the Phu Thai maintained distinct dialects, customs, and ritual practices, making them a unique case in the broader narrative of Thaification and national integration. S. Chaiyasuk and P. Møllerup, "The Ambiguous Use of the Term Phu Tai: A Specific Ethnic Group or a Tai Person in General?" *Vat Taleo Kao eBook*.

Figure 3: Acceptable Cultures of Thailand in 1960s.

This visual encapsulates the ideological thrust of Thailand's 1960s educational reforms: to socialize children into a unified, state-defined identity of Thainess through visual, linguistic, and behavioral conformity. Source: Ministry of Education, 1963.

education policy demonstrates how the Thai state used schooling as a strategic tool not only to instill national loyalty but also to monitor and manage populations like the Phu Thai, whose transnational ties and distinct ethnic identity posed both a cultural and political challenges to the state's assimilationist agenda.

The image in figure 3, originally part of a 1939 cultural campaign under the Ratthaniyom (State Cultural Mandates) and later republished in a 1963 fifth-grade textbook by Thailand's Ministry of Education, powerfully illustrates the state's use of visual pedagogy to enforce a national identity rooted in Central Thai norms. By the 1960s, such imagery had found its way into school curricula as part of the broader Thaification process, aimed at standardizing cultural behavior across Thailand's ethnolinguistically diverse population. The poster delineates a clear

binary: traditional ethnic and regional attire on the left marked as "improper" (อย่าทำ – "Don't do"), and standardized, modernized Thai dress on the right promoted as "proper" (จงทำ – "Do"). In the classroom, this message reinforced the idea that to be "truly Thai" meant conforming to Central Thai cultural aesthetics, particularly in clothing, hygiene, and posture.[135] The inclusion of this image in school textbooks exemplifies how education was mobilized not just for literacy but as a state apparatus of cultural unification. Students from minority or rural backgrounds were thus taught to reject local traditions and embrace a state-sanctioned identity, visually, linguistically, and behaviorally, thereby embedding the ethos of Thainess into everyday life through formal schooling.

These educational reforms propagated Thai nationalist propaganda, but they also extended educational opportunities across Thailand, including into remote areas. Unfortunately, they also imposed a standardized national identity that sometimes overlooked the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of various ethnic groups. During the Cold War, *The Nation* reported on the extensive reforms and restructuring efforts across educational institutions from Bangkok to the Isan region, highlighting a nationwide initiative to enhance the quality of education. A key focus of these reforms was the expansion and development of teacher training colleges, particularly in the lowland central and Isan regions. For instance, in a 1965 article, The Nation reported on the government's plan to establish new teacher training institutions in Nakhon Ratchasima and Khon Kaen, aiming to address the shortage of qualified educators in the northeastern provinces. Similarly, a 1972 feature detailed the restructuring of existing

[135] Thailand Ministry of Education, *Social Studies Textbook for Primary Year 5*, 1963. NAT, Bangkok. Includes reproduction of 1939 Ratthaniyom cultural poster promoting standardized Thai dress and behavior.

educational institutions in Bangkok to better align with national development goals, emphasizing the importance of producing skilled teachers to support the rapidly growing student population. These reports underscore the nationwide efforts to enhance educational standards and the pivotal role of teacher training in achieving these objectives.[136]

The establishment of Khon Kaen and Udon Thani Teacher Colleges exemplifies the government's commitment to cultivating a skilled teaching workforce. These colleges were later elevated to the status of regional state universities and played a crucial role in addressing the educational needs of the kingdom. Statistical data show a significant increase in the number of such institutions across these regions during the reform period. After the passing of the Teacher's Colleges Act, the number of these schools increased from 10 in 1950, which were mostly congregated in the central Bangkok area, to more than 100 by 1976.[137]

Unfortunately, these gains were not uniformly distributed. While doing fieldwork in the North and Northeastern parts of the country in the 1960s and 1970s, American anthropologist Charles F. Keyes observed that local villages often lacked the education infrastructure and resources necessary to operate effectively. Keyes' field notes from January 1963 record his observations about the education provided at Ban Nong Tun in Mahasarakham province, a region in the northeast that is dominated by Laotian or Thai Isan ethnic groups. He provides detailed insights into the education and the nationalization of education in Makasarakham, Thailand, in the aftermath of the reforms of 1960. Keyes discusses the role of teachers in villages like Ban

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[136] *The Nation*, "Government Expands Teacher Training in Nakhon Ratchasima and Khon Kaen," May 12, 1965, 4; *The Nation*, "Restructuring Bangkok's Educational Institutions to Meet National Development Goals," September 8, 1972, 5.

[137] Thailand, Ministry of Education, *Thai Education in Brief*, NAT, Bangkok: Ministry of Education, n.d. Accessed February 14, 2025.

Nong Tun, noting teachers' influence as sources of information about the outside world. He highlights the educational backgrounds and perspectives of teachers, the relationships between schools and national identity, and the material conditions of schools.[138] The goal of the reform was to modernize the education system and expand access to schooling in rural areas like Ban Nong Tun. There were some successes: Keyes noted the presence of teachers who commuted from larger towns, indicating efforts to supply qualified educators to remote villages. He also observed the curriculum's emphasis on Thai history and geography, which reflected the broader nationalistic objectives of the reform.[139] However, for ethnic Lao communities in Isan, such as those in Ban Nong Tun, this content often came at the expense of their own cultural heritage. Instruction was delivered exclusively in Central Thai, sidelining local Lao dialects, and the history taught emphasized central Thai narratives, kings, and geography, rather than local or Lao histories. This not only alienated students from their own heritage but also established the ideological role of education in the process of Thaification. Moreover, the poor material conditions of many rural schools, such as inadequate buildings, insufficient classroom space, and a shortage of textbooks and writing supplies, suggested that the lofty aims of the reform were not equally realized across all regions, further marginalizing ethnically and geographically peripheral communities. These inequities often applied to ethnic lowland communities as well, even though they were closer to the capital than highland ethnic minority schools.

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[138] Charles F. Keyes, "Charles F. Keyes Field Notes, Thailand: 1963-01 (January 1963), Mahasarakham," University of Washington, Southeast Asia Collection. October 28, 2011.

[139] Charles F. Keyes, "Charles F. Keyes Field Notes, Thailand: 1963-01 (January 1963), Mahasarakham,"

In his February 1968 field notes, Keyes described a village school in Isan where the building was in disrepair, with a leaking roof and broken windows, and noted that students often shared a limited number of textbooks due to shortages. He also transcribed interviews with local teachers who expressed challenges in maintaining student attendance, attributing it to the poor condition of school facilities and the scarcity of educational resources. One teacher lamented, "Without proper materials and a suitable environment, it is difficult to keep the children engaged in learning. Children often fall back to using the local language despite the harsh punishment imposed by the teacher."[140] These firsthand accounts suggest the disparities in educational development between urban centers and rural areas during that period, highlighting the obstacles faced by educators in providing quality education in under-resourced communities. For ethnic Lao children in Isan, these material hardships were compounded by cultural erasure: instruction was conducted exclusively in Central Thai, and students were penalized for using their native Lao dialects, reinforcing a system where their identity was deemed incompatible with the ideals of Thai nationhood. Through such policies, education functioned not only as a developmental initiative but also as a tool for systematically erasing ethnic distinctiveness in favor of a monolithic national identity.[141] This suggests that while lowland minorities like the ethnic Lao in Isan received less infrastructural investment, their geographic proximity to administrative centers made them more directly subject to rigorous Thaification efforts through education than their highland counterparts.

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[140] Charles F. Keyes, "Charles F. Keyes Field Notes, Thailand: 1963-01 (January 1963), Mahasarakham,"

[141] Charles F. Keyes, "Charles F. Keyes Field Notes, Thailand: 1963-01 (January 1963), Mahasarakham,"

Beyond Keyes' observation, other sources also provide insight into the challenges of educational development in rural Thailand during the 1960s-70s. For instance, the Regional Education Development Project started in 1958, initiated under Minister of Education Pin Malakul, aimed to assess and improve educational systems in the provinces. The project's findings highlighted the need for Thai language instruction among children living near the Cambodian border, among ethnic minorities of Khom and Khmer heritage, and recognized the necessity of adapting curricula to local needs. These efforts, while seemingly well-intentioned, often faced obstacles such as inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and cultural resistance among ethnic Khmer children. For example, reports by the Ministry of Education on the lack of progress in the Thai language among pupils in Surin province suggest cultural tension in the area, likely because central Thai is incompatible with local languages used by the students.[142] Such challenges suggest the complexities of implementing nationwide educational reforms in diverse and under-resourced regions, reinforcing the broader narrative of uneven educational development during this era.

The Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the Ministry of Interior Planning Division's Office of National Education Committee, surveyed the preliminary report on education in the kingdom from 1967 to 1972.[143] While the survey noted an increase in the

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[142] Paiboon Thongthew. *A Study of Phonological Khmer Dialect Spoken in Surin Province*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Archives, 1973.

[143] The Ministry of the Interior Planning Division's Office of the National Education Committee played a critical coordinating role in Thailand's postwar educational development, particularly during the implementation of the 1960 National Education Plan. As a joint bureaucratic body linking internal governance with national policy direction, this office was instrumental in translating central government educational mandates into regional planning initiatives. It oversaw data collection, needs assessments, and the logistical distribution of

number of students and educational institutions, the rate of growth was consistent and moderate rather than dramatic. The 10 to 13 percent increase following the 1960 Education Reform Act, which mandated at least six years of compulsory education, suggests a steady but not explosive expansion of the system.[144] Statistically, education improved nationwide with rising enrollment and the proliferation of institutions at all levels. However, the reported growth obscures stark regional disparities, especially in ethnically diverse frontier provinces such as Mukdahan, Surin, and Roi Et, areas home to lowland ethnic Lao, Khmer, and Phu Thai populations who, despite being numerically significant, were culturally and linguistically marginalized within the Thai state. These groups were often classified as "minorities" and implicitly treated as culturally distinct from the Central Thai norm that underpinned the national education agenda. The survey failed to assess variations in the quality of education between provincial peripheries and urban centers, thus masking the unequal implementation of educational reforms. In other words, while national statistics portrayed progress, they offered no insight into the quality and ideological function of education in culturally distinct rural villages like Ban Nong Tun or peripheral highland provinces like Mae Hong Son, places where state schooling was not only materially limited but also served as a vehicle for the Thaification of minority communities.

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educational infrastructure across the country, including in rural and ethnically diverse frontier regions. By integrating educational planning within the Ministry of the Interior, the Thai state ensured that schooling was not only a developmental objective but also a mechanism for national integration and administrative control, reinforcing the broader goal of Thaification through institutional expansion. Ministry of the Interior Planning Division, *Preliminary Report on Education in the Kingdom (1967–1972)* (Bangkok: NAT, Office of the National Education Committee, 1972).

[144] หอจดหมายเหตุแห่งชาติ สาขากรุงเทพฯ, เอกสารหมายเลข ก.ท. 2/2.1. NAT.

Table 1: The Number of Schools in Thailand, 1967-1972

Year	Kindergarten and Primary	Secondary	Voctational	Teachers Colleges	University and Higher Education Institution	Total
1967	26,760	1530	176	27	10	28,503
1968	27,230	1,550	161	25	11	28,997
1969	27,856	1,582	164	26	11	29,639
1970	28,727	1,620	162	24	11	30,544
1971	29,619	1,647	159	25	12	31,642
1972	30,450	1,704	157	28	12	32,351
Changes (%)	13.79	11.37	-10.80	3.70	20.00	13.50

Source: Ministry of the Interior, Planning Division, Office of National Education Committee, Preliminary Report on Education: Current Situation and Problems, 1974.

On November 29, 1962, two years after the 1960 education reform passed, Keyes observed a different scenario in terms of the manifestation of the Education Reform Act. In the Wapi Pathum district, just south of the town of Mahasarakham, the village of Ban Ngua Ba (บ้านงัวบา) was granted a school. The name of the village itself, translating to "Crazy Cow Village," highlights the embedded stereotypes and subtle ethnic biases often held by central authorities toward rural ethnic Lao communities.[145] This naming reflects a perception of provincial

[145] In 20th-century northeastern Thailand, village names often emerged from oral traditions, local environmental markers, or humorous anecdotes, reflecting the everyday life, folklore, and linguistic character of the predominantly ethnic Lao rural communities. Names like Ban Ngua Ba (บ้านงัวบา), which translates to "Crazy Cow Village," encapsulate this localized naming culture but also expose how such labels could be interpreted through a lens of central Thai bias. While locally the name might carry a benign or even affectionate story, from the perspective of Bangkok-centric officials and administrators, these names reinforced stereotypes of backwardness or irrationality associated with Isan villages. As Charles Keyes's fieldwork reveals, the village names were not merely geographical identifiers but also sites of cultural

backwardness and a civilizational divide between the rural northeast and the urbanized centers of Bangkok or even Mahasarakham town. Keyes observed that "the newly built school was rather shabby, with weaved bamboo walls, incomparable to those in Bangkok or even in the town of Mahasarakham." The villagers of Ban Ngua Ba were of ethnic Thai Isaan descent and spoke a dialect closer to Lao than to Central Thai, although literate villagers employed the Central Thai script—a reflection of linguistic assimilation policies. Additionally, Keyes noted that the children at the bamboo school looked poorly dressed. "The headmaster explained that there were numerous absences when children went home to help their family. Those who are absent usually come back within five days." These observations underscore not only material inequality but also the deeper cultural and ethnic hierarchies inscribed into the education system, wherein ethnic Lao communities were subtly but persistently marked as less civilized and in need of reform.[146]

While rarely stating ethnic divides outright, a publication by the Ministry of Education titled *Education in Thailand*, indirectly alludes to these divisions through its framing of educational challenges and priorities. The report highlights efforts to extend educational infrastructure to rural regions during the 1960s, citing teacher shortages, substandard school buildings, and limited instructional materials as pressing issues. Yet, its emphasis on the central Thai language and civic education as core elements of rural instruction reveals a deeper agenda:

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meaning, where the tension between local identity and national perception played out in symbolic form. These names, when viewed through a bureaucratic or developmentalist gaze, often marked such communities as peripheral, quaint, or in need of state-led reform, echoing broader patterns of cultural hierarchy and marginalization within the Thai nation-building project.

[146] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963*, University of Washington Libraries, ResearchWorks Archive.

the ideological standardization of culturally distinct populations.[147] By stressing cultural and linguistic unity through education in provinces such as Mahasarakham and Surin—home to significant populations of ethnic Lao, Khmer, and Phu Thai—the report reflects the state's view of these communities as peripheral and in need of civilizational uplift. Thus, the policy focus on language and civic instruction serves as an implicit strategy of assimilation, treating ethnolinguistic diversity not as a national strength but as a barrier to be managed within the framework of Thai nationhood.

Table 2: Number of Pupils in Ban Ngua Ba, 1962

Grade	Pupils	Boys	Girls
1st Grade	40		
2nd Grade	69		
3rd Grade	60		
4th Grade	69		
Total	238	103	110

Source: Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand November 23,1962-December 28, 1962.* Numbers are derived from Charles Keyes handwritten notes.

The above statistics were given by the headmaster of the village school. These statistics illustrate both the expansion and the uneven realities of rural education in the 1960s. The relatively high total enrollment of 238 pupils reflects the growing reach of state-led education reforms in northeastern villages like Mahasarakham, while the noticeable gender imbalance, particularly the higher number of girls, suggests that schooling was becoming a normalized part of the village life rather than a privilege reserved for boys. For this chapter, the data grounds the

[147] Thailand, Ministry of Education, *Education in Thailand* (Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 1960s) NAT: Bangkok.

discussion of Thaification in everyday practice, showing how primary schools functioned as key sites where national identity, discipline, and loyalty to the state were introduced to ethnic and rural children at an early age. Keyes further elaborated that "the inconsistencies are his, not ours," as the headmaster himself did not know which students would attend school on any given day. Some students would show up for school and then be absent the following week to help with the family farm; others stopped attending altogether just days after enrolling. According to Keyes notes, Table 2 represented student attendance on November 29, 1962. The headmaster clarified that these numbers fluctuated daily, depending on who showed up. These patterns of irregular attendance underscore the broader challenges of implementing compulsory education in ethnically distinct frontier communities such as Ban Ngua Ba, a village composed predominantly of ethnic Thai Isaan, whose linguistic and cultural ties to Lao communities across the Mekong distinguished them from the Central Thai identity the state sought to impose. This ethnic difference, compounded by geographic marginalization, meant that national policies like the 1960 Education Reform, which increased compulsory education from four to six years, were weakly enforced in such regions.[148]

The school at Ban Ngua Ba did not conform to the new regulation due to insufficient state support, reflecting how rural, ethnic minority communities in the northeast were deprioritized in the national education agenda. In 1962, two years after the reform, school officials reported that their most urgent needs remained basic: "books for pupils, clothes for pupils, desks and chairs." The headmaster of the school also mentioned that "rarely do any officials come. He himself [headmaster] serves as representatives between the school and the

[148] Charles F. Keyes, Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963.

Amphoe [district] and makes a visit once a month to attend meetings in the Amphoe [district]. He also has gone to Bangkok for in-service training."[149] This neglect not only reflects material disparity but also suggests a deeper ethnic bias in the unequal distribution of educational support and attention across the Thai state

The headmaster of Ban Ngua Ba school also mentioned that due to the lack of funding, the school did not comply with the mandatory education changes from 4 years to 6 years, and that out of the 60 students seen in the Table 2, only 10 students per year would go on to other schools in city centers like Mahasarakham.[150] Thus, the 1960's increased mandatory education requirement was not enforced in lowland provincial areas populated by ethnic minorities, nor did it apply for students with regional identities that were not Central Thai: for example, the Isan Thai of Ban Ngua Ba. Those few who advanced to secondary education in urban areas often acquired fluency in the Central Thai language, enabling them to navigate state institutions and urban society more effectively. In contrast, the majority who remained in the village and discontinued formal schooling retained only local dialects, further reinforcing their marginalization and linguistic separation from the dominant national culture promoted by the Thai state.

The Ministry of Education's 1960 report, Education in Thailand, offers an official narrative that closely mirrors the realities documented in Keyes's field notes from Ban Ngua Ba village in Mahasarakham. While the Ministry emphasizes the expansion of compulsory

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[149] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963*.

[150] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963*.

education and the integration of rural regions into the national framework through Thai-language instruction, Keyes's ethnographic observations expose the significant gap between policy and practice. In Ban Ngua Ba, teachers struggled with irregular student attendance, inadequate materials, and poorly constructed classrooms, challenges that the Ministry's report acknowledges but downplays in its optimistic portrayal. Both sources highlight a shared goal of national integration, yet Keyes's account underscores how these efforts faltered on the provincial frontier, where ethnic Thai Isaan villagers faced systemic neglect. The report's focus on promoting Thai language and centralized norms aligns with Keyes's observation that the written language in the village conformed to Central Thai, despite the community's closer linguistic ties to Laos.[151] Together, these accounts reveal how the state's Thaification agenda was enacted unevenly, often more symbolic than substantive in remote rural areas in the lowland as depicted in Ban Ngua Ba. While official documents celebrated the spread of national education, on-the-ground conditions reflected a pattern of infrastructural insufficiency and cultural dissonance. The villagers' ethnic Lao heritage, peripheral lowland geography, and socioeconomic constraints placed them outside the center of policy attention, rendering them both recipients and victims of a national project that prioritized linguistic conformity over equitable support. In effect, the school in Ban Ngua Ba became a space where national identity was imposed but not meaningfully supported, where the ideological aims of unity clashed with the realities of ethnic diversity and rural neglect.

Militarized Education and Thaificiation and Thaificiation in the Highland Borderlands

These challenges in implementing educational reforms among the Thai Isaan of Ban Ngua Ba were not isolated nor was the propaganda published by the ministry of education in

[151] Thailand Ministry of Education, *Education in Thailand* (Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 1960). NAT, Bangkok.

textbooks in only one region; rather, they reflected broader national patterns, as similar obstacles and resistance emerged even more distinctly in the highland regions of northern Thailand, where ethnic diversity and geographic isolation further complicated the state's efforts at educational assimilation. Ethnic minorities in the lowland northeast were not the only group that did not follow the education reform act of 1960.

Education in Mae Sariang district in November of 1967 was vastly different from that observed by Keyes in 1963 among the lowland Isan, such as the school in Ban Ngua Ba in Mahasarakham. In Mae Sariang, the education officer assisting Keyes noted that teachers in the district's remote villages were often personnel from the Border Patrol Police rather than trained civil educators. These schools were commonly located in ethnically diverse highland villages inhabited by various minority groups, including the Karen, Lua, Hmong, Lahu, and Lisu. These communities, each with distinct languages, belief systems, and social structures, were collectively subjected to a uniform Thai-language curriculum designed in Bangkok—an approach that failed to accommodate their cultural differences and instead promoted assimilation. By contrast, lowland Khon Muang (northern Thai) communities in the same province were assigned government teachers sent directly from Bangkok, reflecting a clear ethnic and geographic stratification in the distribution of educational resources and authority. This discrepancy illustrates how the Thai education system imposed centralized cultural norms more rigidly on marginalized hill tribes, while affording comparatively greater institutional recognition to lowland populations aligned more closely with mainstream Thai identity.[152] Thus,

[152] For the lowland Khon Muang people in Mae Hong Son, education was more standardized and centrally controlled, with government-trained teachers assigned directly from Bangkok. Unlike the highland ethnic minorities who were taught by the BPP in security driven schools, Khon Muang students received formal education emphasizing Thai language

the quality of the teachers in the mountainous highland north was incomparable to those of both the lowland provinces and central urban areas like Bangkok, a disparity that created a rift in terms of the level of Thainess being established among students in different geographic and ethnolinguistic contexts. In the ethnically diverse highlands, home to Karen, Hmong, Lua, and Lahu communities, many schools were staffed by Border Patrol Police personnel rather than trained educators, further reinforcing the militarized nature of education and its role in extending state control rather than fostering pedagogical engagement. By contrast, lowland Thai and urban students, particularly in areas more culturally aligned with Central Thai norms, received instruction from government-trained teachers versed in the national curriculum. The level of Thainess in this situation is reflected in the linguistic practices of students: those taught by Thai-speaking government teachers were more likely to adopt Central Thai, while highland students often retained their native languages due to limited and culturally misaligned instruction. At the school of Ban Mae Salap, one teacher was from the BPP and the other assigned by the district office, illustrating a hybrid educational presence that mirrored the broader tensions between state assimilation efforts and the persistent cultural autonomy of highland minority groups.

These BPP schools, as noted in official 1967 reports by the Ministry of Education, were not merely educational outposts but integral instruments of the state's broader Thaification strategy, particularly targeting the ethnically diverse highland populations. Tasked with more than literacy instruction, they were designed to cultivate a sense of Thainess among minority

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instruction, nationalism, and integration into the state system. This reflects their perceived status as part of the national core, requiring no additional oversight or militarized education. The direct involvement of Bangkok-trained teachers ensured that lowland communities aligned closely with central Thai cultural and political values, reinforcing their seamless integration into the broader Thai nation state. Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Nakhon Pathom, 1967*, University of Washington Libraries, ResearchWorks Archive.

children—including the Karen, Hmong, Lua, and Lisu—by promoting the Thai language, Buddhist-based moral education, and loyalty to the monarchy. This educational model assumed a cultural and political homogeneity that ignored the distinct religious, linguistic, and social systems of these communities. Ministry publications, such as the 1970 volume Education in Thailand, emphasize that the curriculum used in these frontier schools was centrally developed in Bangkok and implemented uniformly, regardless of local context. As a result, these schools acted as mechanisms of cultural standardization, imposing state-defined norms while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and reinforcing the perception of hill tribe identities as incomplete or inferior versions of Thai citizenship.[153] Through the lens of Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, BPP schools functioned as ideological apparati that sought to bind ethnically diverse highland populations into a singular national identity by enforcing a shared language, moral framework, and historical consciousness dictated by the central Thai state.[154]

The goal was to integrate these remote, ethnically diverse populations into a unified national framework, especially at a time when concerns over communist insurgency made ideological cohesion a state priority. Highland communities were viewed as culturally distant and politically vulnerable, prompting the state to use BPP schools as mechanisms of ideological containment and cultural transformation. Despite official portrayals of these schools as symbols of modern progress and national benevolence, Ministry assessments quietly acknowledged their

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[153] Thailand Ministry of Education, *Education in Thailand* (Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 1970). NAT/CM, Chiang Mai.

[154] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

uneven success. Students frequently struggled with Thai-language instruction, which was foreign to their linguistic backgrounds, and community participation was often limited by cultural disconnects and geographic isolation. These challenges reflect how state-led education efforts functioned less as inclusive development initiatives and more as assimilationist projects, seeking to overwrite the cultural autonomy of highland minorities in favor of a centrally defined model of Thainess.[155] In this way, the BPP schools in Mae Sariang were not only extensions of state infrastructure but also embodiments of its ideological ambitions, using education to reshape identity and loyalty along the kingdom's margins. By promoting Thai-language instruction, Buddhist moral values, and reverence for the monarchy, these schools functioned as instruments of Thai nationalism, actively working to instill a state-sanctioned vision of Thainess in ethnically diverse highland populations. The goal was not simply literacy or development, but the cultivation of a singular national identity that subordinated local cultures, languages, and histories to the ideological narrative of a unified Thai state.

The BPP teachers in these schools served as tools for the central state to use to propagate the concept of Thainess. Unlike their counterparts in lowland areas, BPP officers undertook multiple roles and lacked specific training in teaching. Consequently, their management of educational content and the quality of instruction provided to ethnic minority children were often inadequate. According to Keyes' eight out of the 33 schools in the Mae Sariang district were officially run by the BPP, with two additional schools employing BPP teachers while remaining central government-run institutions. According to one educational officer during Keyes's field research in Mae Sariang, "how a Border patrol Police school is transformed into a government

[155] Thailand Ministry of Education, *Education in Thailand* (Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 1970).

school … occurred when the school meets conditions of being a government school [is that] all the students live within 2 kilometers of the school, [among others]."[156] An example is the school of Ban Mae Salap, where one teacher is from the BBP and the other is from the district office. This suggests a process of transitioning from a BBP school to a government district-operated school.

Another case is the school of Ban La Noi outside of Mae Sariang jurisdiction. Through the lens of Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped*, the presence of BPP teachers in Mae Sariang's highland schools represents not just an educational intervention but a strategic assertion of territorial and ideological control, where the borderlands were mapped not only physically but also culturally through the enforcement of Thai identity.[157] Much like how maps reimagined space to legitimize Siamese sovereignty, BPP schools operated as extensions of the state's cartographic imagination, turning ethnically diverse, politically ambiguous highland zones into disciplined units of the Thai nation-state by embedding Thainess through language, curriculum, and bureaucratic transformation. The conversion of BPP schools into government institutions further reflects this effort to fix the border both spatially and symbolically, ensuring that even remote peripheries conformed to the national narrative.

When Ban Mae La Noi School transitioned from being under the jurisdiction of the BPP to becoming a government-run institution, BPP teachers were replaced by government employees, allowing BPP personnel to resume their primary duties of patrolling and serving the border community. According to Keyes, this transition was prompted by a significant influx of

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[156] Charles F. Keyes, "Educational Development and Ethnic Identity: The Thai Model in Historical Perspective" (unpublished manuscript, University of Washington Digital Library).

[157] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*.

immigrants from Burma, particularly ethnic Karen and Shan people, who had settled in Ban Mae La Noi. The number of children enrolled at the school increased from 46 to 102 pupils, with over 90% of them residing within two kilometers of the school.[158] Keyes attributes this population increase to the establishment of permanent residences by migrants from Myanmar, some of whom claimed Thai citizenship through historical descent. The majority of these new residents were of Shan and Karen ethnicities.[159]

The process of claiming citizenship through ancestral descent was facilitated by historical circumstances. During World War II, parts of the Shan State were temporarily annexed by Thailand, and the inhabitants were considered Thai nationals. Following the war, the 1965 amendment to the Thai Nationality Act of 1913, along with the restoration of the principle of *jus soli* (the right of soil), allowed individuals born within Thailand's borders to claim citizenship. Consequently, children of Burmese migrants, regardless of their parents' citizenship status, were eligible to be considered Thai.[160] As a result of this influx of Burmese refugees and migrants, Ban Mae La Noi School experienced a substantial increase in enrollment, transforming into a government-run institution with improved funding. These new pupils were educated according to the centralized Thai curriculum, with an emphasis on language, history, and Thai language instruction. Thus, the school's educational focus was aligned with that of lowland schools throughout the country.

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[158] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963*.

[159] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963*.

[160] "Nationality Act. B.E. 2508," *Royal Government Gazette* Vol. 129, Chapter 28. NAT. March 21, 2012.

The *jus soli* provision in the 1965 amendment remained in effect until 1972, when it was replaced by *jus sanguinis* (the law of blood right) in response to concerns over illegal immigration from Burma and a potential communist insurgency in border areas such as Mae Sariang district.[161] The amended Nationality Act required that both parents be legally resident and domiciled in Thailand for at least five years for their child to be granted Thai citizenship at birth. However, Article 23 of the 1992 Nationality Act revoked this requirement, allowing children born in Thailand to claim citizenship if at least one parent had Thai ancestry, regardless of the other parent's residency status.[162] The shift from jus soli to jus sanguinis in the 1972 amendment of the Nationality Act reflects the Thai state's tightening grip on national identity, particularly in ethnically diverse and politically sensitive border regions like Mae Sariang. This legal change paralleled educational policies aimed at cultivating Thainess among highland and minority populations through standardized curricula and Thai-language instruction. By restricting citizenship to children born of legally domiciled Thai parents, the state signaled that national belonging was not only a matter of birth but of cultural and political conformity, echoing the way education was used to determine who qualified as a legitimate, loyal Thai subject. In this framework, both citizenship and education became tools of exclusion and assimilation, particularly targeting ethnic minorities perceived as culturally and ideologically peripheral to the Thai national core.

Regardless of whether children were citizens, were in the process of obtaining citizenship, or were the dependents of illegal refugees or migrants in the northern border

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[161] "Nationality Act. B.E. 2508," *Royal Government Gazette* Vol. 129, Chapter 28. NAT. March 21, 2012.

[162] Nationality Act (no.2) B.E. 2535, NAT, Bangkok.

highlands, the Ministry of Education, often in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior and the BPP, ensured that they received six years of mandatory education. This education was provided irrespective of whether or not it emphasized the importance of Thainess. The act of educating both foreign and citizen students regardless of their ethnicity or citizenship status reflects an effort to forge a nation by delineating borders through mountains and jungles.[163] If a child lived on the "right" side of the border, they were educated to love the Thai nation and were given the opportunity to obtain Thai citizenship under the 1956 amendment. Conversely, those on the "left" side were considered foreigners. It did not matter that those living on both the right and left sides of the borders shared kinship.

Although political borders legally determine nationality, identity is fluid and influenced by historical, cultural, and geographic factors. The Thai government aimed to create a unified national identity that transcended political boundaries by integrating diverse ethnic groups through education. However, the highland-lowland divide complicated these efforts, as physical isolation made highland groups less accessible to state influence. In contrast, lowland populations, despite ethnic and linguistic differences, were more effectively assimilated. By

[163] Political borders define citizenship, but geography, specifically mountains and jungles, has historically shaped national belonging and state control in Thailand. While lowland areas were more accessible and easier for the state to integrate, highland regions remained culturally and administratively distant. Ethnic minorities in these isolated areas, such as the Karen, Hmong, and Lua, maintained distinct identities due to their geographical separation from the Thai heartland. The Thai state sought to bridge this divide through education, as examined in this chapter. Later chapters will demonstrate how Buddhism and other institutions were also used as tools of assimilation. However, these efforts were uneven. Lowland groups like the Thai Isan were more easily absorbed into the national identity, whereas highland communities were often viewed as outsiders. Education, in particular, acted as a means of delineating not just political borders but also cultural inclusion, extending state influence into historically autonomous regions.

extending education into remote areas, the Thai state sought to strengthen national cohesion, demonstrating that assimilation was as much about overcoming geographic barriers as it was about enforcing political barriers.

As the Thai government intensified its efforts to assimilate highland communities through initiatives like the BBP schools, various NGO and faith-based groups introduced alternative educational programs in regions such as Mae Sariang. These initiatives, often spearheaded by Christian organizations, aimed to provide education that was culturally relevant to the Karen and other ethnic minorities. For instance, the Siloam Karen Baptist Life Development Center, established in 1960 near Chiang Mai, offered training in agriculture, handicrafts, and Christian education, emphasizing instruction in the Karen language and cultural practices. This approach stood in contrast to the Thai state's standardized curriculum, which prioritized Central Thai language and Buddhist teachings.[164] The presence of such NGO-led educational programs highlighted a divergence in educational philosophies: while the state sought cultural homogenization, these organizations aimed to preserve and empower ethnic identities through education. This dynamic created a complex educational landscape in the highlands, where communities navigated between state-imposed curricula and alternative models that resonated more closely with their cultural heritage.

The Power and Limits of Educational Assimilation

In examining the comparative outcomes of educational assimilation between highland and lowland communities in mid-twentieth century Thailand, it is evident that the BBP schools in the highlands demonstrated a greater capacity for preserving ethnic identity than their

[164] Siloam Karen Baptist Life Development Center, *Annual Report and Educational Program Overview, 1960* Chiang Mai: NAT/CM

government-run counterparts in the lowlands. As Charles Keyes observed in his fieldwork, highland children educated under BPP systems often retained their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness because they lacked proficiency in Central Thai, reducing their susceptibility to state-led Thaification efforts.[165] Unlike the centralized and standardized curriculum imposed in the lowlands, which aggressively promoted national identity and Central Thai language use, BPP schools in the highlands, while instruments of state security and surveillance, were less rigid in enforcing cultural assimilation. This allowed highland students to maintain their native languages and cultural practices alongside limited engagement with Thai national identity. In contrast, lowland ethnic minorities were more thoroughly absorbed into the state system through consistent exposure to the national curriculum, Buddhist moral instruction, and mandatory participation in national rituals, making the highland educational environment comparatively more permissive for the survival of minority identities during the 1945–1980 period.

The cultural and social practices of highland communities often diverged significantly from those promoted by Thaification in the 1960s. Highlanders, who often belonged to ethnic groups such as the Karen, Hmong, or Lisu, maintained their languages, traditions, and belief systems, which further distinguished them from the increasingly homogenized lowland Thai population. In his 1968 visit to the Phu Thai village of Mukdahan province, Keyes notes that the people there started to embrace elements of Thainess, including the head of village becoming a patriarchal role instead of the historical matriarchal role it had been earlier. Additionally, the role of teacher was taken from the women of the village and assigned to teachers from the district government. These district teachers were trained in Bangkok and, in most cases, did not know

[165] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand, 1962–1963*.

the language of the children they were teaching.[166] In comparison, the teachers of the northern villages were often locals, who at least spoke the northern Thai Lanna dialect of Thai and were thus able to communicate with highland children.[167] This resistance to assimilation, while preserving their cultural heritage, resulted in slower economic and social progress in these highland regions compared to the more Thaified lowland areas. The lowland regions' embrace of Thaification facilitated much more rapid socio-economic development and integration into the national framework as a result of the 1960 reform, a process that unfolded much more slowly in the highland regions.

While the reforms yielded measurable successes in many parts of the country, especially the lowland northern valleys and northeastern Isan regions, their effectiveness was deeply uneven. In these regions, educational institutions benefited from greater infrastructure, state attention, and linguistic affinity with central Thai norms. The development of teacher training colleges in Nakhon Ratchasima and Khon Kaen, for example, exemplified the state's investment in building a loyal, educated citizenry. However, even within these lowland spaces, ethnic minority populations, such as the Lao-speaking Thai Isan or Phu Thai, faced tensions between their cultural heritage and the state's assimilationist agenda. Schools became sites where local identities were reconfigured, often at the expense of traditional matriarchal authority and indigenous languages. By contrast, highland communities, including the Karen, Hmong, and Lisu, encountered the education system not as a developmental partner but as an alien force. The

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[166] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Educational Conditions in Rural Northeastern Thailand, 1962*, University of Washington Libraries, Southeast Asia Collection. Archive.

[167] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Karen Villages, Mae Sariang District, Mae Hong Son Province, 1967*, University of Washington Libraries, Southeast Asia collection. Archive.

use of teachers in remote areas, the lack of culturally competent instruction, and the material neglect of frontier schools all compounded local resistance to the state's educational vision.

As this chapter has shown through both statistical data and ethnographic fieldwork, education's effectiveness as a tool of Thaification was regionally uneven. In the lowland Northeast and North, institutions such as teacher colleges and urban schools facilitated partial assimilation among Lao-speaking and other ethnic Thai groups, although not without displacing local cultural structures. In the highlands, where geographic isolation, linguistic plurality, and religious diversity were more pronounced, efforts to integrate ethnic minorities through state schooling often faltered. The reliance on Border Patrol Police teachers, the scarcity of materials, and the absence of meaningful community engagement resulted in resistance, indifference, or incomplete adoption of state ideals. Schools functioned less as bridges to citizenship than as symbols of state intrusion, particularly in communities where cultural autonomy remained strong.

Ultimately, the Thai state's education reforms during this period illustrate both the power and the limitations of institutional assimilation. While some communities adapted to the pressures of Thaification, others resisted or were only partially transformed, highlighting the enduring resilience of regional and ethnic identities. The legacy of this era continues to shape Thailand's educational landscape today, where debates over curriculum, language, and inclusion still reflect the unresolved tensions between national unity and cultural diversity. In examining these patterns, we are reminded that education is never a neutral or purely developmental endeavor; it is a deeply political project, embedded in the contested processes of identity, authority, and belonging.

In 2024, Thailand implemented an "Education for All" policy, mandating 15 years of free education for all children residing within its borders, regardless of their citizenship status. This policy includes Thai nationals, undocumented migrants, and stateless individuals and is rooted in a series of education reforms that date back to the 20th century.[168] Despite these efforts at universal education, children undergoing Thai education do not necessarily develop a sense of belonging to the Thai state. Historically, children without identification documents have faced significant challenges in gaining admission to Thai schools. Educational institutions within temporary shelters along the borders often lack Thai language classes, hindering stateless, migrant, or refugee children from accessing the Thai school system, higher education, and employment opportunities. The history of educational reforms aimed at promoting the concept of Thainess across the country can be traced back to the post-World War II period. These reforms have played a crucial role in fostering Thai nationalism and assimilating ethnic minorities, whether or not they are Thai citizens. The education system has been instrumental in cultivating a sense of Thainess within the conceptual boundaries of the Thai nation-state.

[168] Thailand, *Education for All 2015 National Review* (Bangkok: NAT, Thailand Ministry of Education, 2015), 4-8.

CHAPTER 3: FAITH AND NATION: THE ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN ETHNIC INTEGRATION AND STATE-BUILDING IN 20TH CENTURY THAILAND

Unlike most countries in Southeast Asia, during the second half of the twentieth century, the official religion of Thailand was Buddhism. In the post-colonial era, Indochinese nations such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia transitioned from French colonialism to communism as atheist nations. While Burma also emerged from British colonialism, its religious policies were more complex. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Prime Minister U Nu promoted Theravada Buddhism as a central part of national identity, even declaring it the state religion in 1961. However, following the military coup of 1962, the Ne Win regime adopted a secular socialist approach, reducing state involvement in religious affairs while maintaining an unofficial preference for Buddhism. From the late 1980s onward, the military regime reasserted Buddhist nationalism, using religious patronage to bolster its authority and marginalized religious minorities.[169] Thailand, on the other hand, reaffirmed its commitment to Buddhism as not only

[169] After gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Burma saw rise in Buddhist nationalism. The state supported Buddhism as a key element of nationality identity, but it did not officially declare it the state religion until 1961 under Prime Minister U Nu. U Nu's government promoted Theravada Buddhism and attempted to enforce laws that favored Buddhism over other religions. However, this changed in 1962 when General Ne Win seized power in a military coup. Ne Win's socialist military regime (1962-1988) took a different stance, emphasizing secularism under the phrase "Burmese Way to Socialism." While Buddhism remained dominant in society, the government officially distanced itself from religious favoritism, suppressing religious institutions that opposed state policies. Monasteries and monks who were critical of the government faced persecution, and religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims encountered discrimination. After 1988, when the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power, the military began using Buddhism to legitimize its rule. The Junta sponsored Buddhist projects, controlled religious institutions, and used Buddhism as a tool to reinforce its authority while marginalizing non-Buddhist minorities. Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 45; Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 102;

the official religion of the country, but also one of the three pillars of Thai nationalism.[170] The three pillars of Thai nationalism are the combination of Monarchy, Buddhism, and Nation, which are symbolized by the colors blue, white, and red on the national flag. Thus, it is only proper to examine Buddhism as a tool used by the state to exert power over and "Thaify" the ethnic minorities of the frontier, both lowland and highland.

Thaification of lowland and highland regions differed greatly.[171] In the lowlands, much like the Thaification process embedded in compulsory education, Buddhism as a tool of national identity was easier to maneuver for the central Thai Theravada Buddhist Sangha, the monastic community of Buddhist Monks, nuns, and novices responsible for preserving and spreading Buddhist teachings. This was because the majority of ethnic minorities in the provincial north and northeast lowland were already Buddhist.[172] In the highlands of Thailand by contrast, many ethnolinguistic groups, including the Thai-Kadai, Karen, Hmong, and Lua, practiced animism.

Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 76.

[170] From November 7, 1953 until 1975, the official religion of the Kingdom of Cambodia after decolonization was Theravada Buddhism. This ended in 1975 when the communist regime known as the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 131-156. For religion and nationalism in southeast Asian nations in the post-colonial setting see: Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016.)

[171] See Chapter 1 for a more extensive discussion of the definition of Thaification.

[172] This research did not disregard the existence of Islam in the southern part of Thailand nor the vast ethnic Malay population of the south, but the focus of the research itself examines the ethnic minorities of the highland vs. lowland north and northeastern parts of the country. For information regarding Thaification of Malay and the Islamic faith in the twentieth century see:

Buddhist institutions, particularly temple schools and monastic education systems, became crucial mechanisms through which the Thai state facilitated cultural integration and the promotion of national identity. After World War II, the largest and most influential Buddhist institution in Thailand was the Sangha, the collective body of monks in Theravada Buddhism, which remains the dominant branch of Buddhism in the country. The Sangha Supreme Council (Mahathera Samakhom) was established in 1902 under King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and later formalized with the Sangha Act of 1962. This act created a hierarchical structure that centralized the administration of the Sangha under the direct oversight of the state, ensuring that Buddhist institutions aligned with state policies.

The Sangha Act of 1962 restructured monastic life, defining the roles and responsibilities of monks, and regulating how monasteries were organized. This institutional framework aimed to promote a unified national identity through religious education and practice. The act also strengthened the state's control over the Sangha, ensuring that the clergy played a role in fostering Thaification: the process of integrating ethnic minorities into mainstream Thai culture. In this way, Buddhist monasteries, through temple schools and other educational programs, were essential in the state's efforts to modernize and centralize authority while preserving Thailand's religious and cultural heritage. In addition to their religious functions, many temples in Northern and Northeastern Thailand became centers for both religious instruction and community education, serving as tools of social integration, particularly for ethnic minorities. The monastic education system, alongside secular education reforms, helped spread not only Buddhist teachings but also Thai language and cultural values, reinforcing the Thai state's influence in

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Kee Howe Yong, "Can the Malay Muslims Be Thai Enough in Thailand's Far South?" *Asian Anthropology* 22 (1): 21–38.

rural and highland areas.[173] Thus, Theravada Buddhism became an essential part of the Thai state, representing one of the three pillars of Thainess and serving as a tool of Thaification in its mission to nationalize the country and transform diverse populations into Thai citizens.

This chapter investigates the intersection of religion, migration, and ethnic identity in North and Northeastern regions, focusing on how ethnic minorities, whether long-established groups or recent refugees, navigated these pressures. During this process, religious conversion and the adoption of Thai cultural norms were used as tools of assimilation, and these processes varied significantly between highland and lowland regions of Northern and Northeastern Thailand. Through these case studies, this chapter sheds light on broader strategies employed by the Thai state to cultivate a unified national identity during a period of increased migration and ethnic diversity.

The Mahanikaya and the Religious Expansion of the Thai State

By the post-WWII period, the Mahanikaya, the larger of the two primary sects of Thai Theravada Buddhism, took the lead in sending missionaries to remote areas in both the lowlands and highlands. Charles F. Keyes suggests that the northern highlands were a major focus for these Buddhist missionaries, an interest derived from Buddhist concerns about Western Christian NGOs and the increasingly successful conversion of highland ethnic groups to Christianity.[174] While Thailand has two major monastic orders–the Mahanikaaya and the Dhammayuttika Nikaya–the latter, founded by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in the 19th century, remained less

[173] สภานิติบัญญัติแห่งชาติ [National Legislative Assembly], *พระราชบัญญัติคณะสงฆ์ พ.ศ.* 2505 [Sangha Act of 1962], ราชกิจจานุเบกษา [Royal Gazette], 5 มกราคม 2505 (January 5, 1962), NAT, Bangkok.

[174] Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (May 1971): 551-567.

involved in these missionary activities. This was due to its smaller size, stricter monastic discipline, and closer association with the monarchy, which meant its influence was more centralized and focused on urban and elite monastic education rather than mass Thaification efforts. In contrast, the Mahanikaya, which constitutes the vast majority of Thailand's monastic community, was more directly controlled by the state and played a significant role in the expansion of Thai Buddhist influence in peripheral regions. This does not mean the lowlands were neglected, but the ethnic Thai Isan of the Northeast and Thai Lanna of the North were already followers of the national faith, so the process of Thaification through religion did not disrupt their livelihoods as much as it did in the highlands. Nonetheless, other ethnic minority groups residing in the lowlands faced similar scenarios of religious conversion as those in the highlands.[175] For example, the Phu Thai of the Northeast adapted their animistic beliefs in order to incorporate them into the Theravada Buddhist Sangha.[176] Pattana Kitiarsa, the preeminent scholar of Phu Thai studies, emphasizes the coexistence of spirit-medium cults and popular Buddhism. Thus, Phu Thai communities in the lowland Northeast were able to successfully negotiate and integrate their local beliefs into broader Buddhist practices rather than abandoning them.[177] Similarly, anthropologist William Klausner's research addresses the roles of popular Buddhism in both Northern and Northeastern Thailand, where folks beliefs, including animism,

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[175] Saenpuran Prayong, "Buddhist Teachings in Pyha (Riddle Philosophy): Dhamma Riddles in Isan Culture and Society" *KKU International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2018): 1-21.

[176] Chales F. Keyes, *Field Notes: Ban Nong Tun, Mahasarakham and Nakhon Panom, Thailand, 1963*, University of Washington Libraries, Southeast Asia Collection. Archive.

[177] Pattana Kitiarsa, "Buddha Phanit: Thailand's prosperity religion and its commodifying tactics," in *Religious Commodification in Asia*, pp. 134-158, Routledge.

merged with formal Buddhist practices.[178] The cultural syncretism seen in both the highlands and lowlands reflects how ethnic groups like the Phu Thai in the lowland or the Skaw Karen that converted to Buddhism as a result of Buddhist missionaries in the highland negotiated their identities within the national framework of Theravada Buddhism as authorized by the central Thai state.

Refugee Encounters with Buddhism and Thaificiation

Ethnic minorities in the northeast were not the only ones to experience the pressures of Thaification via Buddhism, however. Refugees and migrants from Indochina, particularly the Vietnamese, faced significant cultural and religious pressures during their resettlement in Thailand, especially in the Northeast. The process of Thaification, or assimilation into the Thai national identity, often conflicted with the diverse religious and cultural practices of these migrant groups. While some Vietnamese were Buddhists and could integrate into the dominant Thai Theravada Buddhist framework, others followed Catholicism or maintained traditional animistic beliefs, complicating their integration into a society where Buddhism played a central role in both national identity and rural social organization. For example, in 1968, American CIA agent Lewis M. Stern traveled through Indochina and Thailand, visiting the northeastern city of Udon Thani. During the Vietnam War, the Americans maintained a large air base there while conducting the secret war in Laos and Cambodia. From this base, the United States supported various military operations in Northern Vietnam. According to Stern, Udon Thani and other cities in the Northeast "had a large Vietnamese population, most of whom were

[178] William Klausner, "The 'cool heart': Social relationships in a Northeastern Thai village," *Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1966): 117-124.

undocumented."[179] Stern further observed that Vietnamese refugees in Udon Thani frequently sought refuge in local Buddhist wats (temples), noting that some even considered themselves Buddhist. If these Vietnamese refugees were indeed practicing Buddhists, they were very likely Mahayana Buddhists as that was the dominant school of Buddhism in Vietnam.

Stern notes that there was also a Vietnamese refugee camp in the area that was operated by the United Nations. Despite the presence of this camp, many Vietnamese chose to bypass refugee status by integrating directly into local society. Stern further observes that while the "characteristic distinction between Vietnamese and Thai (Thai Isan) was differentiated through language and accents," it was easy for Vietnamese in Udon Thani to adopt to local language and customs, retaining their Vietnamese identity and practicing a new Theravada faith as if it were their original religion.[180] Stern's notes on Vietnamese refugees in Udon Thani show a willingness to embrace Thainess by integrating into the Theravada-dominated sect of Buddhism in order to be accepted into the Thai nation-state. This example showcases the practical acceptance of a not-so-foreign religion as one's own in order to secure personal or family safety.

Vietnamese refugees' adoption of Theravada practices in the lowland northeast is only one example of refugees coming to face with Thainess and Thaification. Refugees from Laos and Northern Vietnam entering the highland north faced a different situation when it came to religion and the Theravada faith. Like the Thai Lue refugees from Laos, some refugees had already

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[179] Lewis Stern, "Box 3/Folder 1: Thailand's Vietnamese Minority" ca. 1986 in *The Lewis M. Stern Office Files Collection, 1980-2001*. Southeast Asia Section, The University of Washington Library Archives. Access, April 28, 2024.

[180] Lewis Stern, "Box 3/Folder 1: Thailand's Vietnamese Minority" ca. 1986 in *The Lewis M. Stern Office Files Collection, 1980-2001*. Southeast Asia Section, The University of Washington Library Archives. Access, April 28, 2024.

synchronized their local animist beliefs with Theravada Buddhism, but Hmong refugees entering the highlands from Laos had no prior engagement with Theravada practices. Instead, they often found themselves in familiar terrain because the highland areas of northern Thailand housed many ethnic Hmong among the variety of ethnic minorities residing there. While the Thai Lue had prior engagement with Theravada Buddhism and the Hmong were not fully engaged with the religion, the fact that they were geographically situated in the highlands prevented them from being fully influenced by the Buddhist missionaries of the Thai state who were sent to Thaify refugees in the highlands.

Particularly after the Indochina conflicts in the mid-twentieth century, Vietnamese refugees were subjected to religious conversion processes similar to those endured by other ethnic minority groups. Indigenous identities sat a back seat to Thailand's efforts to create a more homogenous society. As part of the state-led Thaification efforts, the Thai government often promoted Buddhism as both a religious and cultural vehicle to integrate diverse ethnic groups, aiming to diminish ethnic distinctiveness in favor of unified national identity. This policy was not limited to the Vietnamese as a foreign-born group, but also affected other migrant and ethnic minority groups in the northern and northeastern regions. Affected groups included, among others, Lao, Khmer, and Hmong refugees. who often practiced a mix of animism and Buddhism.

Prasit Leepreecha, a Thai anthropologist of Hmong descent, is currently conducting research on the Thai Lue and Hmong refugees in northern Thailand and their interactions with the Thai state. One of Prasit's key contributions is his exploration of how these groups navigate their identities within frameworks imposed by the state, particularly through the lens of indigeneity and state policies. Prasit's work often addresses how the Hmong, Thai Lue, and other

highland groups have been incorporated into broader national development plans, with particular attention to the social and cultural challenges they face in reconciling their ethnic identities with the pressures of Thai nationalism and Thaification.

Prasit's studies sometimes touch on how religious practices and institutions, including Buddhism, can be part of broader assimilation and development frameworks in the country, especially when these religious institutions align with state policies. Notably, the absence of the Thai Buddhist Sangha among the northern highland refugees from Laos suggests limitations in one of the three primary aspects of Thaification. The absence of Theravada Buddhism among northern highland refugees, such as the Hmong and Thai Lue, even though the Thai Lue already practice a similar religion syncretized with animism and shamanism, suggests that these groups were never fully incorporated or pushed to assimilate into a Thai identity. This stands in contrast to the experiences of lowland refugees, such as the Vietnamese in Udon Thani.[181] As a result, Buddhism plays a more implicit role in his discussion of identity politics, rather than serving as a central theme.

Religious Uniformity, Regional Variation, and Thaification in Lowland Isan and Lanna

In the lowland northeastern region of Thailand (Isan), Theravada Buddhism played a pivotal role in the daily lives of the local people, transcending ethnic boundaries such as the Thai

[181] Prasit Leepreecha*, Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion*, eds. Don McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, and He S (Bangkok: Mekong Press, 2008); Prasit Leepreecha, "Becoming Indigenous Peoples in Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 543-562. doi:10.1017/S0022463417000462; Prasit Leepreecha, "Multiculturalism from Below: Indigenous Movements and Local Participation in Northern Thailand," in *A Half Century of Upland Development: From Victims of Development to Self-Developers*, eds. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti et al. (Chiang Mai: CESD, 2011), 38–43; Ian G. Baird, Prasit Leepreecha, and Urai Yangcheepsujarit, "Who Should Be Considered 'Indigenous'? A Survey of Ethnic Groups in Northern Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity* 18, no. 4 (2017): 543–562.

Isan, Phu Thai, and others. Despite some regional differences in practice and expression, the form of Buddhism followed in the northeast did not deviate significantly from the version practiced in central Thailand. This religious unity provided a platform for the Thai Buddhist Sangha, the monastic order, to extend its influence and consolidate a sense of national identity. For example, the central Thai Buddhist Sangha's members also included many notable monks and abbots from the northeastern region, including Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah, who spearheaded the incorporation of northeastern monastic practices into the broader Thai Sangha.[182] Moreover, the northeastern monks' connections with rural and agrarian lifestyles resonated with the state's national integration policies. Despite attempts at centralizing the Sangha under government control, the Northeastern tradition's moral authority allowed it to maintain some autonomy and exert spiritual influence on Thai Buddhism as a whole.

Buddhism, particularly in its Theravada form, became a powerful tool for the Thai state in fostering a cohesive national identity during the twentieth century. The state-sanctioned interpretation of Thainess often revolved around shared cultural symbols with Buddhism at its core. Because Buddhism was already deeply entrenched in northeastern Thai society, it acted as a bridge between the Isan population and the central Thai elite. By emphasizing a common religious tradition, the Thai state promoted a unified sense of belonging that transcended regionalism, despite ethnic and linguistic differences. The Thai government under the military rule of Sarit Thanarat, reinforced the centralization of the Sangha, or Buddhist monastic order,

[182] Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1971): 551–67; Peter A. Jackson, "State Control of the Sangha in the Twentieth Century," in *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 63–93 (Books and Monographs: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 1989).

aligning it with state objectives. In the Northeastern region, the idea of regionalism was erased from city centers like Nakhon Rachasima (locally known as Korat) where Thainess is more prominent than it is in the rest of the northeastern region where unique cultural practices more closely resembled Laotian traditions.

In 1963, the process of Thaification, particularly through the lens of Buddhism, had a significant impact of the Phu Thai community of Ban Nong Sung in Mukdahan province. The Buddhist monastery in this village presents an intriguing case of religious and cultural integration, reflecting both traditional Phu Thai matrilineal practices and the broader influences of Thai-Isan Buddhism. While the architectural structure of the wat closely resembled the dominant Lao-style wats found throughout the lowland of Northeastern Thailand, especially those along the Mekong River, the social composition of its residents revealed a unique departure from the norm. Unlike most village temples in the region, which were predominantly occupied by male monks, Ban Nong Sung's monastery was primarily home to female nuns. This gender dynamic was deeply rooted in the matrilinear social structure of the Phu Thai, where men traditionally moved into their wives' family households.[183]

American anthropologist, Tom Kirsch documents the presence of nuns at the monastery in his 1963 field notes. He shows the nuns and novices engaged in daily activities, such as religious rites and community service, underscoring the way in which traditional Phu Thai customs were maintained even within a Buddhist framework. The detailed depiction of the pulpit within the monastery further emphasizes the religious significance of the nuns' roles, which stood in contrast to the typical male-dominated religious hierarchies of central Thai and Lao

[183] Tom Kirch, *Field Notes, 1963*, Southeast Asia Collection, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Collection Number 14-27-3146, Box 3.

Buddhism.[184] This departure in gender roles was not only a reflection of Phu Thai matriarchal customs but also a marker of how Buddhism as a state-endorsed religion was forced to adapt to the local practices of this community.

Thaification efforts of the 1960s, which sought to standardize Buddhist practices across Thailand, gradually began to reshape the religious and social norm of Ban Nong Sung. While the Phu Thai community maintained its matrilineal traditions, the introduction of Thai-Isan Buddhist norms emphasized male monkhood and central Thai cultural values, which began to exert their own influence over the village's religious life. The predominant role of female nuns, though initially a strong symbol of Phu Thai identity, faced pressures from the broader Thai Sangha's efforts to integrate the region's religious practices with those of the central Thai state. Thus, while the Phu Thai community of Ban Nong Sung continued to practice Buddhism in a manner aligned with their unique customs, the influence of Thaification through religion marked the beginning of shifts in both gender dynamics and religious expression within the community of the lowland northeastern ethnic minority. With the rising influence of the Thai Sangha, women's roles in ritual practices became more restricted, as formalized monastic structures emphasized male religious authority, while spirit mediumship–traditionally a female dominated space–faced increasing pressure to conform to state-sanctioned Buddhist practices.

In terms of Buddhism's influence among lowland ethnic groups, northeastern and northern variations do not differ greatly from the central Thai Sangha in terms of practices and beliefs. Despite regional cultural differences between all the ethnolinguistic groups, the influence of the central Thai Sangha has created a significant degree of uniformity across these regions,

[184] Tom Kirch, *Field Notes, 1963*. Box 3.

especially in terms of monastic discipline and doctrinal adherence. Historically, the Sangha in Thailand, including the Northeastern and Northern regions, was shaped by reforms initiated by royal and state authorities. As early as 1833, King Mongkut had established his Thammayut order during his time as a monk before ascending the throne. The Thammayut order, also known as the Thammayut Nikaya, was a reformist movement within Thai Buddhism aimed at purifying monastic practices. Mongkut sought to bring Thai monasticism closer to the original Pali Canon by emphasizing stricter adherence to the rules of Vinaya (monastic discipline) and greater emphasis on scriptural study.[185] These 19th century reforms continued to influence the northern and northeastern monastic practices in the 20th century. However, the practices remained largely consistent with the central Thai Sangha with minor regional variations in rituals, such as funerary practices and spirit beliefs.[186]

Katherine A. Bowie, in her work on the changing funerary practices and spirit beliefs in Northern Thailand, highlights both the continuity and regional variations in rituals when compared to Central Thai practices. While core Buddhist rituals, such as chanting and merit-making, aligned with those found in Central Thailand, Northern Thai communities, especially lowland communities, also integrated distinct local traditions. For instance, funerary customs often included the belief in spirits or *phi*, such as spirit-parents reclaiming their deceased

[185] Katherine A. Bowie, "A Political Archaeology of Theravada Buddhism: Unearthing the Emotions of Changing Funerary Practices in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (2021): 369–92.

[186] Katherine A. Bowie, "A Political Archaeology of Theravada Buddhism: Unearthing the Emotions of Changing Funerary Practices in Northern Thailand."

children, a concept less emphasized in Central Thai Buddhist practices.[187] These local variations were particularly noticeable in methods of handling of inauspicious deaths, which traditionally required immediate burial to prevent spiritual harm. Such practices reflected pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs that continued to coexist alongside formal Buddhist ritual in the region. However, despite these regional customs, the broader framework of Theravada Buddhism remained consistent with Central Thai monastic traditions largely shaped by the centralization of the Thai Sangha during King Mongkut's Thammayut reforms.

Local spiritual traditions, particularly belief in spirits (*phi*), tend to coexist alongside mainstream Buddhism in both Northern and Northeastern lowland regions. These beliefs are more prominent in rural areas occupied by those that identify with an ethnolinguistic background primarily of lowland origins, yet the overall religious structure still aligned closely with Central Thailand's monastic hierarchy.[188] Thus, while local customs may have varied slightly, the core principles of Buddhist practice—such as meditation, merit making, and adherence to the Pali Canon—remained consistent across the regions. These shared practices allowed Buddhism to act as a unifying force across different ethnic groups, contributing to national integration under the central authority of the Thai Sangha.

In this way, Buddhism became more than just a religion in the lowland; particularly in the northeast, it was a key element in the nation-building project of the Thai monarchy and government. Religion was instrumental in linking the historically autonomous Isan region to the

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[187] Katherine A. Bowie, "A Political Archaeology of Theravada Buddhism: Unearthing the Emotions of Changing Funerary Practices in Northern Thailand."

[188] Matthew J. Walton, "Buddhism, Nationalism, and Governance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2017; online ed, December 5, 2016), accessed September 15, 2024.

central Thai state. The Thai Buddhist Sangha played a role in this by promoting shared religious practices and rituals that aligned with those of the central region, helping reinforce the idea of a singular, unified Thai identity. Through Buddhism, the Isan people were subtly encouraged to align themselves with the cultural and political values of central Thailand, reinforcing the notion of a unified Buddhist kingdom.[189] This helped reduce ethno-regional mobilization by positioning the Isan identity within the overarching Thai national identity, effectively linking local religious practices with national political goals.

In northern lowland Thailand, historically known as the Lanna Kingdom, Theravada Buddhism also played a significant role in shaping cultural and religious practices. Like Isan, the lowland populations of the Lanna region, mainly Thai Lanna, were already predominantly Buddhist with religious traditions closely resembling those of central Thailand; however, the situation in the highlands, home to various ethnic minority groups, presented a very different religious landscape that did not necessarily align with the Buddhist norms of the lowland regions or the central Thai state. These highland communities, including groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Akha, typically maintained spiritual practices that centered around nature worship and reverence of local spirits, a stark departure from the more institutional Buddhist norms of the lowland population or central Thailand. Lanna rulers and Buddhist leaders historically promoted Buddhism in the region, attempting to integrate those highland populations into the larger

[189] Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1971): 551–67; Walton, "Buddhism, Nationalism, and Governance,"; Jacob I. Ricks, "Integration Despite Exclusion: Thai National Identity among Isan People," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 27 (March 2020).

Buddhist and national frameworks, but these efforts met with varying degree of success.[190] The lowland northern Lanna Thai Buddhist population was heavily influenced by both Burmese and central Thai traditions, particularly during and after the Burmese occupation of Lanna in 1558-1774. Highland groups, however, retained distinct cultural and religious identities that resisted full assimilation into the Buddhist mainstream.

The Lanna Kingdom was historically centered in Chiang Mai and was a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism long before its integration into the Siamese state in the late 19th century. Buddhism in the Kingdom of Lanna was deeply embedded in daily life, with monasteries (wats), monks, and religious rituals playing central roles in both governance and society. During the reign of King Tilokkarat (1441-1487), Lanna reached its peak as a center for Buddhist scholarship; the kingdom hosted the 8th World Buddhist Council in 1477 to review and preserve Theravada texts.[191] This era further solidified Buddhism's significance in shaping Lanna's cultural identity, thus allowing the lowland people of Thai Lanna to inherit and follow the central Thai Sangha more easily than other ethnic groups in the region.

Following Lanna's annexation by Siam in 1893 under King Chulalongkorn, Buddhism continued to thrive in the north, albeit under the centralized administrative structure of the Sangha as dictated by the Bangkok-based Thai state. Lanna's Buddhist traditions were incorporated into the broader national framework, aligning more closely with the centralized control exerted by the Siamese monarchy over the Sangha. Among other things, this served to

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[190] Angela S. Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 233.

[191] Angela S. Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand*, 152-155.

ensure religious unity across the newly consolidated kingdom.[192] Despite the kingdom's political annexation, while Buddhist practices of the lowland Lanna remained consistent with those in central Thailand, the highland regions, home to ethnic minorities like the Karen and Hmong, retained their distinct spiritual practices, which were less influenced by mainstream Buddhism.

The Buddhist practices of lowland Lanna shared many similarities with those of central Thailand, especially after the passing of reforms aimed at standardizing Buddhist practice across the kingdom. This facilitated a religious connection between the lowland Thai Lanna and the central Thai state that promoted a sense of cultural unity similar to that experienced in the Isan region, The northern Sangha, once semi-autonomous under the Lanna rulers, became a part of the broader Thai Buddhist hierarchy, reinforcing the state's goal of national and religious integration. The lowland Buddhists of the North were fully incorporated into the central Sangha by the mid-20th century. Charles F. Keyes' 1968 interview with the abbot of Wat Benchamabophit, states that the chairman of Tharmacarik Program commented that monks from the north and particularly the northeast were the primary participants of the program. While the leaders of the Tharamacarik program and the wider Sangha were from Central Thailand, specifically Bangkok, the majority of the monastic orders originated from the northern and northeastern lowland communities. The Abbot estimated that more than 50% originated from the lowland northeast and northern provinces, while the rest were from other regions in Thailand.[193]

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[192] Angela S. Chiu, *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand*, 230; "The Myth of Lanna, Its History and Trying to Reconstruct the Past," *Thai Enquirer*, last modified April 14, 2020.

[193] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Interviews, and Research Materials on Highland Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, University of Washington Digital Collections, accessed September 11, 2024.

This pattern of monastic participation further highlights the integral role that lowland northern and northeastern communities played in reinforcing national Buddhist unity. It also underscored the significance of the idea of promoting Thainess through Buddhism: the religious Thaification of the 20th century.

Charles F. Keyes explored another Buddhist tradition of the lowland Thai Lanna community during his 1968 anthropological studies in Chiang Mai province. In his field notes, Keyes describes Buddhist ceremonies in Chiang Mai during a funeral practice, which reflect a strong integration of Theravada Buddhist beliefs with distinct local traditions. One key observation was how funeral ceremonies, which were rich with Buddhist symbolism, differed from central and even northeastern Thai customs in both attire and ritual components. While central Thai funerals were often marked by mourners donning black, Thai Lanna customs, like those in the Isan region, involved the wearing of white, a color associated with purity and merit-making. Furthermore, Keyes noted that it was customary for young boys in Thai Lanna society to be temporarily ordained as novice monks during funerals, an important gesture meant to accrue merit for the deceased. This practice was not as prevalent in central Thai funeral ceremonies.[194]

Keyes also detailed the open-air cremation practices that distinguished Thai Lanna funerals of the 1960s. In contrast to the enclosed, ceremonial buildings utilized for cremations in central Thailand and Isan, the Thai Lanna often performed cremations in outdoor settings, aligning their customs more closely with their highland neighbors. One such example was observed in 1967 in Chiang Mai province, where an elderly woman's funeral involved a

[194] Charles F. Keyes, *Funeral Ceremonies, August 1967, Wat Chiang Mai (Thailand)*, August 1967, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

procession from the temple (wat) to an open-air cremation ground. The pyre was lit in full view of the gathered mourners, and the ceremonial bathing of the deceased, as well as the removal of coffin decorations before the cremation, were key aspects of the ritual.[195] These practices reflected the unique way in which the Thai Lanna balanced traditional Buddhist rituals with their local interpretations of death and the afterlife, deeply influenced by their geographic and cultural contexts. Situated in northern Thailand, the Thai Lanna people long maintained connections to both highland and lowland communities, fostering a blend of Buddhist customs with animist and indigenous beliefs. Their distinctive funeral practices, such as open-air cremations and the ordination of young children to make merit for the deceased, underscored their communal approach to death, where rituals were public, integrated, and deeply communal. These practices also emphasized the strong belief in merit-making as a way to ensure a positive transition for the deceased in the cycle of rebirth.

The Thai Lanna people's adherence to Theravada Buddhism, much like other lowland Thais, played a central role in reinforcing their alignment with the broader national concept of Thainess. This religious and cultural affiliation distinguished them from their highland neighbors, such as the Hmong, Karen, or Lahu, who practiced a variety of spiritual and animist beliefs. One of the most prominent symbols of this religious alignment of the 20th century was the creation of Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, a significant Buddhist site strategically located atop the mountain Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai Province. While the Thai Lanna were traditionally lowland people, the establishment of a major wat in such a highland locale spoke to their

[195] Charles F. Keyes, *Funeral Ceremonies, August 1967, Wat Chiang Mai (Thailand)*, August 1967, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

expanding influence and the role of Buddhism in bridging geographic and ethnic divides, an attempt at Thaification upon highland ethnic groups.

Figure 6 shows an image from December 1967, depicting various activities within the temple grounds of Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. This image captures the intersection of culture, geography, and religion. The positioning of the Thai Lanna Buddhist temple in a predominantly non-Thai space illustrates the expansion of Thai cultural and religious influence into the highlands. Moreover, the presence of Hindu mythological imagery, such as Deva statues, within the temple complex, reveals the blending of Buddhist and Hindu elements, further demonstrating the deep historical and spiritual layers present in Thai Lanna Buddhism.[196] This strategic religious positioning underscores the complexity of Thai Lanna identity, which was not confined by traditional geographic boundaries by the twentieth century, but was instead shaped by a dynamic interaction with the diverse ethnic landscape of northern Thailand. By situating themselves in such highland areas, the Thai Lanna illustrated the adaptability of their cultural and religious practices, reinforcing their connection to the broader Thai state and the central Sangha while also negotiating their place within a multiethnic environment.

The integration of these local customs into the broader Thai Buddhist hierarchy reveals the flexibility of the central Thai Sangha, particularly during the mid-20th century, when efforts to promote national unity were intertwined with religious standardization. As part of the central Thai Sangha's outreach, Thai Lanna practices were accepted and even incorporated into the national religious framework, helping to solidify the process of "Thaification" in the northern

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[196] Charles F. Keyes, *Temple Grounds and Activities at Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, December 1967 (Thailand)*, December 1967, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections; Shrine, 2 Photos, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, December 1967, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

lowlands through religious means. The acceptance of Thai Lanna practices into the central Thai Buddhist tradition also highlights how Buddhism, as both a spiritual and cultural force, served as a unifying factor within Thailand. This religious integration contributed to the creation of a broader sense of Thainess while still allowing for regional diversity in ritual expression. As a result, the distinctiveness of Thai Lanna practices became part of the larger Thai Buddhist identity, illustrating how religion functioned as a vehicle for both cultural cohesion and national unity during the 20th century. However, this acceptance of the Thai Sangha only lasted in the lowland areas. Thai Sangha policies in the highlands, the geographic zone that is full of ethnolinguistic groups that differ greatly from the lowland communities, experienced an entirely different reception.

Buddhism, Christianity, and the Politics of Ethnic Assimilation in Northern Highlands

The influence of Buddhism and other major religious practices on ethnic identity differs significantly between the highlands and the lowlands. Nevertheless, the national religious institution of Thailand, the Theravada Sangha, successfully promoted the concept of Thainess and spread Thaification throughout the country following the borders that demarcated the kingdom from its neighbors. Thai Buddhist scholar Janjira Sombatpoonsiri examines the narratives underpinning the activism of Buddhist nationalist movements in Thailand. Janjira argues that these movements represent an emerging strand of Thai nationalism: Buddhist majoritarian nationalism. Her work focuses on three discursive components that shape the movement's narratives. She explores 20th-century Buddhist movements through a two-pronged approach to these components, which view political elites as subservient to the Muslim minority and Islam's growing influence. Secondly, she argues that countering these threats necessitates a new form of national consciousness that centers Buddhism and Buddhists as the majority in

Thailand's national identity. Finally, Janjira analyzes the ideological stance that accompanies these movements, which seeks to further merge religion and politics.[197] Janjira's argument situates itself in the historical interrelationship of the state, nationalism, and Buddhism, while tracing how recent political upheavals of the twenty-first century, including political polarization, have influenced the movements' organizational development and discourse.

Similarly to Janjira's interpretations of the relationship between state and religion, this research focuses on the discourse between Thai nationalism and Buddhism in the latter half of the twentieth century as the legitimacy of Theravada Buddhism in the northern and northeastern provinces was increasingly threatened. In the 20th century, the Buddhist Sangha was increasingly forced to combat the rise of Christianity among ethnic minorities in the highland, as well as increasing numbers of permanent refugees and migrants from French Indochina who did not practice the official religion of the kingdom. As an official component of Thai national identity, Theravada Buddhism became part of the nation's new consciousness, an identity intended to transcend ethnic background. Unlike Janjira's research, this chapter's evaluation of Christianity and animism in the highlands and lowlands of the north and northeast unveils the different methodologies employed by the state among different ethnolinguistic groups. The Thai Sangha chose to operate differently among different identities, justifying their actions by arguing that they were simply serving the needs of the local people. These local groups might or might not welcome Buddhism in their cities and villages, but it is the official religion of an increasingly powerful regional state, powerless ethnic minorities have no choice but to comply.

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[197] Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "Buddhist Majoritarian Nationalism in Thailand: Ideological Contestation, Narratives, and Activism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, 2022 (3): 398–422.

Participation in Buddhist rituals and temple life was not only encouraged but often required as part of the de facto naturalization process for non-Thai residents. The adoption of Buddhist practices, such as participating in local festivals, ordinations, and merit-making ceremonies, played a significant role in promoting a sense of belonging and loyalty to the Thai state. However, the conversion to or acceptance of Thai Sangha Buddhism could be fraught with tension, particularly among Vietnamese and other groups with strong ties to their ancestral beliefs.

Charles F. Keyes completed an interview with the Abbot of Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok, who was the chairman of the Thammacarika Program, on February 2, 1968. The Thammacarika Program refers to a Buddhist missionary initiative in Thailand that began in the 1960s. It is historically associated with the efforts of the Sangha to promote Theravada Buddhism and integrate rural and remote populations into the national religious and cultural framework. The role of the Thammacarika Program serves as an example of a state-aligned tool of Thaification.[198] The Thammacarika program was utilized to spread Buddhist teachings and foster national identity by sending monks to rural areas, including regions inhabited by ethnic minorities such as the Hmong, Thai Lue, Phu Thai, and even Vietnamese refugee settlements in the lowland northeast. These efforts were part of a broader state strategy to promote Thainess through religion, education, and the monastic system. Monks from the Thammacarika program would often set up temporary schools outside of the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, organize community events, and engage in merit-making activities to bring isolated or marginalized groups closer to the cultural and religious norms of the Thai State. In this sense, the

[198] พระราชบัญญัติคณะสงฆ์ พ.ศ. 2505 (Sangha Act of 1962), ราชกิจจานุเบกษา (Royal Gazette), 5 มกราคม 2505 (January 5, 1962), NAT, Bangkok.

Thammacarika program was not just a religious effort but also a form of cultural diplomacy, aiding the Thai state in consolidating its influence over diverse and often fragmented communities. It played a particularly crucial role in areas where Christian missionary efforts were also taking place, as the Thai government sought to counter foreign religious influences with Theravada Buddhism. Thus, the official religion of the state was leveraged to reinforce national unity through religious conformity.

According to Keyes' interview with the Abbot of Wat Benchamabophit, the original plan of the program was to send monks from Bangkok or the surrounding Central Thai provinces to the northern highlands for proselytization. However, as noted by the abbot, "one of the problems in employing monks from Bangkok is communication." In the second year of the program, in 1966, "monks from northern provinces as well as monks from Bangkok were recruited for the program. Each unit had at least two monks who were natives of the province." This plan proved to be impractical in terms of organization, stated the abbot. The native monks recruited were Northern Thai Lanna, not ethnic Karen or other ethnolinguistic groups residing in the highlands of the northern provinces. Language and geography played crucial roles in shaping identity in the northern highlands. The Thammacarika program and the abbot's attempt to include local provincial monks may not necessarily have been beneficial, as the language spoken by the newly recruited monks and the people they aimed to convert was not necessarily close enough to allow for communication.[199] Ethnolinguistic Thai Lanna people might have been able to communicate with the central Thai monks who served as regional representatives in the Thammacarika

[199] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Interviews, and Research Materials on Highland Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, University of Washington Digital Collections, accessed September 11, 2024.

program. Unfortunately, they were likely unable to communicate with the Christianized Karen, the animistic Lua, or the Shamanistic Hmong, those who were highest on the priority list of conversion to the Thai state faith. Thus, the language barriers between monks in the Thammacarika program doomed the program to failure, as noted by the abbot in a 1967 interview with Keyes.

Due to the misalignment between the recruited monks and the local populations in the Thammacarika Program, "only 4 monks and 42 novices were ordained in 1966." Of the four monks ordained that year, two were ethnic Karen from Mae Hong Son and two were Hmong, one from Tak Province and the other from Phetchabun Province. The novices mentioned were primarily young boys ordained temporarily in highland temples as part of the customary practice of novice ordination in rural areas. However, challenges in sustaining the ordination of monks from ethnic minorities soon became apparent. According to the abbot of Wat Benchamabophit, "the Karen monks only remained in the Sangha for 20 days before returning to lay life."[200] This short duration highlights the difficulties faced by these individuals, particularly the ethnic Karen, in adapting to monastic life as practiced by monks in central or lowland Thailand. While

[200] Burmese Theravada Buddhist practice commonly includes brief periods of monkhood, often lasting only a few days, weeks, or months. This monkhood is intended primarily for merit-making rather than lifelong commitment. Karen Buddhists, influenced by Burmese traditions, likely followed this flexible approach, explaining why the Karen monks in the Thammacarika Program left after 20 days. Their practices contrast with Thai Sangha norms, which emphasize longer-term monastic engagement, particularly during Buddhist Lent (Vassa) or for national integration efforts. Additionally, Karen Buddhism often blends animism and spirit-worship, making it distinct from the centralized, state-controlled Thai Theravada tradition. This misalignment likely contributed to the difficulty in sustaining Karen participation in Thai missionary programs. Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Interviews, and Research Materials on Highland Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, University of Washington Digital Collections, accessed September 11, 2024.

Buddhism had been accepted among some highland ethnic groups, such as the Karen in Mae Hong Son, the manner in which it was adopted did not mirror the deep assimilation seen in lowland or central Thai communities. The economic pressures faced by Karen men, many of whom needed to work to support their families, coupled with the high literacy requirements of monastic life to presented significant barriers. As the abbot noted, monks in Thai society are expected to be highly literate, with proficiency not only in Central Thai but also in Pali and Sanskrit, which are essential for engaging fully in Buddhist education and ritual activities.[201] This standard was especially challenging for ethnic minority monks, many of whom lacked formal education in the central Thai language, much less the Pali and Sanskrit required by the monkhood.

The brief tenure of the Karen monks symbolized the broader difficulties faced by minority communities in conforming to the Central Thai Buddhist monastic order. A similar pattern emerged among the Hmong monks from Phetchabun and Tak, who left the monastic order after three months and one month, respectively.[202] Like the Karen monks, the Hmong faced cultural and linguistic barriers that hindered their ability to engage fully with the Thai Sangha. These issues, compounded by the economic realities and communal responsibilities faced by ethnic minorities, ultimately led to their return to lay life and their respective communities. The cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between these groups and the Central Thai

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[201] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Interviews, and Research Materials on Highland Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, University of Washington Digital Collections, accessed September 11, 2024.

[202] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Interviews, and Research Materials on Highland Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, University of Washington Digital Collections, accessed September 11, 2024.

Buddhist hierarchy were simply too substantial to be overcome within the framework of the program. Thus, the Sangha Act, and to some extent the Thammacarika Program, faced difficulties in retaining ethnic minority members in comparison to the greater success enjoyed by Buddhism in the lowland areas of both North and Northeastern areas of the country.

The highland areas of northern Thailand were home to variety of ethnic groups such as the Karen, Hmong, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu, whose religious practices were not traditionally aligned with Theravada Buddhism. These highland groups often adhered to animist, shamanistic, or ancestor-worshipping belief systems, reflecting their deep connection with the natural environmental and their own social structures. Unlike the lowland Lanna Thai, for whom Buddhism was an established part of life, these highland communities had little to no historical attachment to Buddhism.

The integration of Buddhism into some of these highland communities, particular the Karen, offers an example of how religious and cultural landscapes shifted through interactions with lowland Thai Buddhist institutions. The Karen people of Mae Sariang in Mae Hong Son province, encompassing both Skaw and Pwo Karen subgroups, provide a fascinating case of this religious integration. Keyes's 1968 field notes illustrate the transition of Buddhist institutional influence, showing Karen individuals engaging with Theravada Buddhist practices.[203] The Thammacarik, or missionary monks, played a pivotal role in introducing and integrating Buddhist teachings into the Karen community of Mae Sariang. The presence of Thammacarik monks alongside Karen individuals at Wat Kittiwong, a significant religious center in Mae Sariang, highlighted the growing acceptance of Buddhist practice.

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[203] Charles F. Keyes, *Pwo Karen Novices and Monks, Wat Kittiwong, March 1968 (Thailand)*, March 1968, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

In April 1968, Keyes observed that Pwo Karen individuals were more readily accepting of Buddhism than their Skaw Karen neighbors, highlighting the role of Buddhist missionaries in bridging the gap between traditional Karen beliefs and Buddhism. However, this process also deepened divisions within the broader Karen community. The Pwo Karen, historically more settled and integrated with lowland Burmese and Thai cultures, had long engaged with Theravada Buddhism, while the Skaw Karen, who were more geographically isolated and maintained strong animist traditions, were more resistant to Buddhist influence. Additionally, in October 1968, Keyes documented Pwo Karen beggars at Wat Kittiwong, reflecting shifting social and religious dynamics within the Karen community. The increasing participation of Karen groups in Buddhist festivals suggests that Buddhism was becoming more embedded in Karen life, even as distinctions between Pwo and Skaw Karen remained evident in their levels of engagement with Buddhist traditions.[204]

Ordination ceremonies involving Karen individuals from Mae Top Nua village further illustrate the integration of Buddhism into their cultural fabric. Figure 8 from March 1968 captures significant moments at Wat Kittiwong, including the ordination of young Karen Luk Kaeo (novice monks).[205] The image depicts Karen individuals in traditional attire participating in religious rituals, indicating how Buddhism, once foreign to their highland identity, became an integral part of their spiritual and cultural framework. The presence of these ceremonies at Wat Kittiwong highlights the temple's role as a center for both religious practice and cultural

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[204] Charles F. Keyes, *Karen Beggars at End of Lent, Wat Kittiwong, October 1968 (Thailand)*, October 1968, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

[205] Charles F. Keyes, *Pwo Karen Women, Wat Kittiwong, Mae Sariang, October 1968 (Thailand)*, October 1968, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

continuity, fostering a space where Karen could negotiate their identity amidst the broader socio-cultural landscape of highland Thailand. Through such ceremonies, the state's agenda of cultural homogenization was subtly advanced among highland city centers, while also allowing the Karen to maintain a distinct, albeit increasingly Thai-aligned, spiritual framework.

Buddhism was not the only major religion descending upon the Thai highlands, however. Among the Skaw Karen, Christianity, particularly Protestantism, has played a significant role. The spread of Christianity among these groups can be largely attributed to the work of western missionaries and non-governmental organization (NGOs) in the 19th and 20th centuries. British colonial influence in neighboring Burma (Myanmar) was a key factor, as many Karen in Burma were converted to Christianity by British and American Baptist missionaries.[206] These newly converted Karen Christians maintained strong connections with their kin across the border in Thailand. The border was just an imaginary line that did not impede their efforts to spread the Christian faith. The Karen of Burma, who had often been favored by the British colonial administration due to their conversion, became influential in bringing Christianity to their relatives in the northern Thai highlands.[207] Thus, Christianity's role in the Thai highlands, especially among the Skaw Karen, illustrates the long-lasting effects of missionary efforts and colonial history in shaping the religious and cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia as a region.

In his fieldnotes, Keyes observes an interesting dynamic between ever more Buddhist Pwo Karen and the Christian Skaw Karen. The Pwo Karen, particularly those in proximity to

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[206] Andrew J. Finch, "Translating Christianity and Buddhism: Catholic Missionaries in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Burma," *Studies in Church History* 53 (2017): 324–37.

[207] Mikael Gravers, "Christianity and the Karen: Conversion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in Burma," *Moussons* 12 (2008): 71.

Mae Sariang, showed increasing integration with Buddhist practices, largely through the influence of the Thai state and Buddhist missionary monks like the Thammacarika. In contrast, the Skaw Karen, particularly those influenced by Christian missionaries like the O.M.F (Overseas Missionary Fellowship).[208] In Mae Sariang, maintained their distinct Christian identity. This identity, established through the efforts of British and American Protestant missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries, created a different cultural trajectory for the Skaw Karen.[209] Christianity, as observed by Keyes, became a marker of ethnic and religious differentiation from the increasingly Buddhist Pwo Karen. The religious divergence between the Skaw and Pwo communities mirrored broader ethnic divisions in the region, with Christianity often serving as a source of cultural resilience and community cohesion for the Skaw Karen, while Buddhism further integrated the Pwo Karen into the national Thai framework. Thus, Keyes' observation highlights the interplay between religion, ethnicity, and state influence in the highland areas of Thailand. The dual processes of Thaification through Buddhism and Christianization not only shaped religious practices but also influenced the broader social

[208] The Overseas Missionary Fellowship was originally known as the China Inland Mission, founded by James Hudson Taylor in 1865. After the communist takeover in China, the organization shifted its focus to other parts of East and Southeast Asia, and it became known as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. The organization primarily focuses on evangelism, church planting, and community development in various countries, including work among ethnic groups such as the Karen in Thailand. Anthony J. Miller, *Pioneers in Exile: The China Inland Mission and Missionary Mobility in China and Southeast Asia, 1943-1989* (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2015; "China Inland Mission Archive," *Archives Hub*, SOAS University of London, accessed September 16, 2024.

[209] Charles F. Keyes, *Pwo Karen at a Ceremony to Present Sandals to a Monk, Wat Kittiwong, April 1968 (Thailand)*, April 1968, University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections.

structures and cultural identities of these Karen subgroups as ethnolinguistic groups from the highlands.

Western NGOs, many of which had religious affiliations, also played a crucial role in providing educational and healthcare services in these remote areas, often using these services as means of proselytization. These NGOs and missionary organization offered schooling, literacy programs, and medical assistance, which were highly attractive to highland groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Akha, who were often marginalized by the Thai state and left without access to such services. Christianity provided an alternative to state-promoted Buddhism, offering not only spiritual support but also tangible benefits in term of education and social mobility.

For the Karen people, particularly along the Thai-Burmese border, Christianity provided more than just spiritual guidance. It offered tangible benefits like education, social mobility, and community organization. The American Baptists began their first operation in Thailand in 1833; by 1960, missionary groups were instrumental in fostering a sense of identity among the Karen, especially the Skaw, by blending religious instruction with essential services. This was particularly appealing as many highland groups were traditionally excluded from state-promoted Buddhism. They found an alternative in Christianity that helped them navigate both spiritual and material needs.[210] For the Karen of both Skaw and Pwo origin, the context of displacement along the borderland between Thailand and Burma became an issue as the state consolidated the imagined political borderline in the 20th century. The Karen have faced significant educational

[210] Yoko Hayami, "Karen Culture of Evangelism and Early Baptist Mission in Nineteenth Century Burma," *Social Sciences and Missions* 31, no. 3-4 (2018): 251-283; P. Jolliffe, "Education and Displacement at the Thai-Burma Border," in *Learning, Migration and Intergenerational Relations*, Palgrave Studies on Children and Development (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.).

challenges in the last century. Beginning in the 1950s after the abrupt decolonization of Burma, many refugee camps emerged along the Thai side of the border as ethnic warfare between separatist movements in Burma exploded. Ethnic minorities in those states were forced to deal with the unjust provisions of decolonization, as well as the failed guarantees of the Panglong Conference that had promised independence after ten years of Burmese decolonization.[211]

Similarly to the Skaw Karen, the Akha and Hmong communities initially saw conversion to Christianity as a way to access education and healthcare. For instance, in the 1960s, the traditionally animistic Akha began converting to Christianity when missionaries provided not only religious teachings but also schooling and healthcare services.[212] Religious NGOs created a support system that facilitated both religious conversion and the integration of these groups into broader social and economic structures that did not align with the Thai state-led Buddhist

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[211] Following Burma's abrupt decolonization in 1948, ethnic minorities in the border states, particularly the Karen, Shan, Kachin, and Chin, suffered uniquely as they faced both state repression and ethnic warfare. The Panglong Agreement of 1947, which had promised ethnic minorities autonomy and the right to secede after ten years, was never honored by the post-independence Burmese government, leading to widespread disillusionment and rebellion. Many ethnic groups, fearing Burman domination, launched separatist movements, triggering prolonged ethnic conflicts. By the 1950s, these conflicts intensified as the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) responded with heavy-handed counterinsurgency campaigns, leading to mass displacement, forced labor, and human rights abuses. Unlike ethnic Burmese civilians, minority groups were often targeted under martial law, village relocation programs, and counterinsurgency operations, which accused them of supporting armed resistance. As violence escalated, thousands fled across the border into Thailand, forming the earliest refugee camps, where they lived in precarious conditions with limited recognition or assistance. Their suffering was compounded by their statelessness, exclusion from Burmese political representation, and the loss of land and livelihoods, making them particularly vulnerable to cycles of violence and displacement. Pheeraphong Jampee, *From Panglong to Bangkok: The British Colonial Legacy in Burma, 1947-1963* (Master's thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2019).

[212] Alexander Horstmann, "Sacred Networks and Struggles among the Karen Baptists across the Thailand-Burma Border," *Les frontières "mouvantes" de Birmanie*, no. 17 (2011).

Sangha. The spread of Christianity in the highlands also introduced new religious divisions, even as it sometimes stood in contrast to both traditional animist practices and Buddhist conversion efforts promoted by the Thai state. This multitude of religious actors created a complex religious dynamic in the region.

Faith, Nation, and Authority in Frontier Thailand

This chapter on religion serves as a critical bridge within the dissertation's broader argument about how overlapping state institutions orchestrated the assimilation of ethnic minorities in Northern and Northeastern Thailand between 1945 and 1980. By demonstrating how Theravada Buddhism, as both a spiritual system and an official instrument of national identity, was employed to integrate both lowland and highland communities, this chapter extends the dissertation's central thesis that assimilation was not a singular policy but a layered, adaptive process enacted through religion, education, monarchy, and cultural politics. It directly complements the previous chapter on education by revealing how monastic institutions and Buddhist rituals were closely tied to state schooling projects in rural and border regions, with temple schools and monastic teachings reinforcing both Thai literacy and Buddhist moral values as essential components of Thainess. Simultaneously, this chapter lays the ideological groundwork for the monarchy chapter that follows, illustrating how the central Thai state and Chakri dynasty mobilized Buddhism not only as a religious force but as a unifying cultural symbol, positioning the monarchy as the protector of both the faith and the nation. The intertwined roles of Buddhism and monarchy thus formed a dual mechanism of moral and political authority that shaped the daily lives and ethnic identities of both lowland majorities and highland minorities, anchoring this chapter squarely within the dissertation's comparative study of assimilation strategies in frontier Thailand.

Because of this religious diversity in the highlands, the Thai State—especially during the mid twentieth century—actively promoted religious conversion to Buddhism as a means of integrating minority groups into the Thai nation state. Conversion efforts were part of a larger strategy of state centralization and assimilation that sought to bring highland ethnic minorities into closer alignment with lowland Thai norms, both culturally and religiously. Facing challenges from NGOs and Christian missionaries, the Thai state itself shifted from total assimilation of the highlands to selective integration of either those groups that showed interest in Buddhism or those groups that relocated to lowland city centers like Mae Sariang in Mae Hong Son province.[213]

Missionary monks and government initiatives encouraged Buddhism as a unifying force. It was seen as a way to civilize and modernize the highland people according to the cultural standards of the lowland Thai majority. Schools were often established alongside temples, providing both religious and secular education that promoted Buddhist values and Thai national identity. This religious conversion was not merely spiritual but also deeply political, because it served to reinforce the Thai state's authority over these remote and often marginalized communities. In January 1968, a program put on at the highland ethnic minority Lua Village school proved that Buddhism and an educational institution established by the central state were one and the same. The integration of Thai nationalism in the Lua community was prominently showcased through the mandatory Thai education system, which intertwined with Buddhism and use of the central Thai language. Lua children in Ban Pa Pae were seen performing "Thai"

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[213] Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, "The Thai State and Ethnic Minorities: From Assimilation to Selective Integration," in *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia*, eds. Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2005), 151-166, published online October 21, 2015.

dances for visiting Buddhist missionary monks, a cultural practice taught at the Border Patrol School that highlighted the state's effort to assimilate ethnic minorities into mainstream Thai culture. This cultural education was accompanied by Buddhist ceremonies for Lua students, thus reinforcing Buddhism's role as a unifying force and pillar of Thai identity.[214] The presence of monks and the regional abbot distributing booklets on Buddhism to school children in Ban Dong further emphasized the centrality of Buddhism in the educational curriculum.[215] This incorporation of Buddhist teachings and rituals within the school environment served not only to promote religious values but also to facilitate the spread of the central Thai language, essential for national cohesion. These efforts by the Buddhist Sangha, carried out through educational initiatives led by missionary monks, aimed to bridge ethnic and cultural divides in the highlands of Mae Hong Son. By integrating religion and education, the Thai state sought to instill loyalty and unity among diverse highland communities, reinforcing both Buddhist values and national identity.

The division between highland and lowland religious practices highlights a significant cultural distinction in northern Thailand. The lowland Lanna people were historically more integrated into a broader Thai Buddhist tradition, while highland groups maintained distinct cultural identities, including their own religious practices. As Buddhism became increasingly tied to Thai national identity, the Thai state exerted greater pressure on highland ethnic minority groups to assimilate. This push for integration was part of a broader effort to consolidate control

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[214] Charles F. Keyes and E. Jane Keyes, *Charles F. Keyes Field Notes, Thailand: January 1968, Mae Sariang*, Keyes Fieldnotes Thailand 1960s Collection, January 2012.

[215] Charles F. Keyes, *Charles F. Keyes Field Notes, Thailand: May and June 1968, Mahasarakham, Bangkok, and Mae Sariang*, Keyes Fieldnotes Thailand 1960s Collection, January 2012.

over the northern borders and diminish the influence of non-Buddhist and non-Thai elements. This process was not without resistance. Many highland groups, especially those with strong cultural and religious ties to their animist or shamanistic traditions, were hesitant to fully embrace Buddhism. Even among those who converted, syncretism often obscured where traditional beliefs and practices were merged with Buddhist elements, creating unique religious landscapes that did not fully conform to the orthodox Theravada Buddhism of the central Thai state.

The religious landscape of northern Thailand highlights the differences between lowland regions where Theravada Buddhism has long been dominant, and highland regions where traditional, non-Buddhist religious practices have persisted. For the lowland Thai, Buddhism served as a bridge to connect them with the central Thai state. However, for the highland peoples, religious conversion to Buddhism was heavily promoted as a tool of assimilation, a part of a broader effort by the Thai state to integrate diverse ethnic groups into a unified national identity. The success of these efforts varied, with some highland communities adopting Buddhism, while others continued to maintain their traditional religious practices. The result was a complex and multifaced religious landscape in northern Thailand.

Theravada Buddhism and the Thai Sangha overall played a central role in the Thai state's mid-20th-century efforts to integrate and assimilate ethnic minorities, especially in the highlands. The Thammacarika Program, which sent monks to remote areas, was part of a larger strategy to promote Buddhism as a unifying national force. In lowland regions where Theravada Buddhism had long been practiced, this process was less dramatic, particularly among ethnic groups like the Phu Thai and Thai Lanna. However, in the highlands, where animism and shamanistic traditions were prevalent, groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Lua responded differently, often merging

Buddhist teachings with their traditional practices, or maintaining their cultural and religious distinctions despite state efforts.

Religious dynamics in the lowlands and highlands of Northern and Northeastern Thailand reveal the complexity of state assimilation efforts. In the lowlands, Buddhism was not only a religion but also a cultural institution that spread Thai language and values, aligning communities like the Isan people more closely with the central Thai state. In contrast, the highlands remained a battleground of religious and cultural negotiation, with missionary monks from the Thai state encountering resistance, especially where Christian NGOs had already established a presence. This resulted in a varied religious landscape, where some highland groups adopted Buddhism while others embraced Christianity or continued to practice animism.

Buddhism, as a pillar of Thai national identity, was instrumental in the state's broader agenda of nation-building and cultural unification. While lowland regions largely integrated Buddhist values into their regional identities, the highlands proved more resistant, reflecting the diverse ethnic and religious realities of Northern and Northeastern Thailand. This contrast underscores the challenges faced by the Thai state in its efforts to cultivate a unified national identity amidst a backdrop of complex and persistent ethnic diversity.

CHAPTER 4: CROWNING UNITY: THE MONARCHY ON NATIONAL IDENTITY AND REGIONAL COHESION IN POST-WAR THAILAND

In the years following World War II, the Thai monarchy emerged as a symbol of national unity, deeply influencing the political and social fabric of the country. From 1945 to 1980, this institution played a pivotal role in shaping regional identities, influencing governing structures, and navigating the complex dynamics of assimilation across northern and northeastern Thailand. This chapter explores the monarchy's impact on regional identity formation, its interaction with local government, and the varying perceptions of national allegiance in different regions through different ethnicities across highland and lowland, the north and the northeast.

Historically, Thai kings have functioned as both political leaders and symbolic figures, representing the spiritual and moral center of the nation. The monarchy not only served as a unifying force across the nation but also influenced regional identities, particularly in northern and northeastern Thailand. The monarchy, through its influence over key national institutions such as the military, bureaucracy, and religious organizations helped shape the regional dynamics that continue to define the country today. Moreover, royal-sponsored development projects and the introduction of nationalist politics have served as key tools in fostering Thaification through identity formation and regional integration.

This chapter illustrates how the monarchy, working together with Buddhism, operated as a foundational pillar in Thai state's post-war assimilationist agenda. In previous chapter, Theravada Buddhism was deployed not merely as a spiritual practice but as an institutional instrument of Thaification, especially significant in the highland peripheries where animist and Christian minorities resided. This religious unification effort laid the groundwork for cultural and ideological consolidation, but it was the monarchy, examined in this chapter, that

served as the personified, unifying symbol capable of transcending ethnic and regional divides. King Bhumibol's personal visits to marginalized and borderland communities, his rural development projects, and the royal family's cultural patronage, most notably Queen Sirikit's textile revival campaign, fortified the mechanisms of religious assimilation by attaching them to the monarchy's benevolent, apolitical image. Thus, the patronage of the monarchy softened many more intrusive aspects of state-driven integration.

Together, these chapters construct a narrative of complementary statecraft where religion and monarchy acted in tandem: Buddhism was the moral and communal glue in village life, while the monarchy embodied national unity and modern development. This relationship was particularly significant in highland regions like Chiang Rai or Tak, where the state's ability to enforce administrative authority was weak, but where Buddhist missionaries, sometimes supported by royal initiatives, extended both religious and royal influence. In the lowlands, where Buddhism already held sway, the monarchy's role in reinforcing religious orthodoxy and regional loyalty was equally pronounced, with royal ceremonies, temple renovations, and education reforms consolidating cultural homogeneity. By transferring the symbol of national identity from religion to monarchy, moving from one pillar of Thaification to another, the ideological underpinnings of Thainess were bolstered through overlapping institutions, each reinforcing the other's legitimacy and reach. This synthesis helped to provide a cohesive framework for understanding ethnic integration strategies between 1945 and 1980.

Sacred Monarchy and Nationalism

Jack Fong's work offers a vital anthropological lens for understanding the symbiotic relationship between monarchy and nationalism, particularly within the Thai context. In his study *Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction*, Fong contends

that the modern Thai monarchy functioned not merely as a constitutional or ceremonial institution but as a sacred entity intrinsically tied to the construction of the Thai nation. He argues that following the political reforms of 1932, which formally ended absolute monarchy, the Chakri dynasty—especially under King Bhumibol Adulyadej—reinvigorated its moral authority by embedding royal symbolism within Buddhist cosmology and nationalist rhetoric. This strategy allowed the monarchy to present itself as the spiritual embodiment of the nation, a move that both consolidated state power and masked the tensions of modernization and regional diversity. Fong's analysis directly informs this dissertation's monarchy chapter by illustrating how royal rituals, development projects, and public imagery during the Cold War era framed the monarchy as a unifying moral force, particularly in ethnically diverse Northern and Northeastern Thailand, thereby facilitating state-led assimilation policies under the guise of benevolent kingship.[216]

Building on Fong's insights into Thailand's sacred monarchy, Moh Abdul Hakim and his colleagues offer a compelling comparative perspective from Indonesia, illustrating how monarchy can function as a stabilizing force within the framework of national identity construction. In their study of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, Hakim et al. argue that local monarchism in post-colonial Indonesia has not only survived modern state formation but has actively contributed to fostering trust in democratic institutions and reinforcing regional allegiances to the national narrative. The authors highlight how the Yogyakarta monarchy, despite Indonesia's republican structure, maintained its authority by positioning itself as a cultural and historical custodian intimately linked to the nation's founding myths and anti-

[216] Jack Fong, "Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 40, no. 3 (2010): 421–43.

colonial struggles. This dual function, simultaneously representing both local identity and national unity, parallels the Thai monarchy's role in integrating peripheral regions like Northern and Northeastern Thailand, where royal projects and symbolic presence helped to solidify central authority while respecting localized cultural expressions. Hakim's work thus broadens the analytical frame of this dissertation by showing how monarchies in Southeast Asia strategically adapt traditional authority to coexist with modern nationalism, a dynamic central to the narrative of Thai royal influence from 1945 to 1980.[217]

The adaptive resilience of monarchy in modern Southeast Asia, as illustrated by Fong and Hakim et al., finds deeper historical and theoretical resonance in the works of Ernst Kantorowicz and J. C. D. Clark, whose studies on European monarchies illuminate enduring patterns in the relationship between monarchy, religion, and national identity. Kantorowicz's seminal work *The King's Two Bodies* articulates a medieval conception of kingship in which the monarch embodies both a mortal, physical presence and a transcendent, immortal political body representing the unity of the realm. This duality established monarchy as a sacred institution whose authority extended beyond mere governance into the metaphysical realm of national coherence.[218] Complementing this, Clark's revisionist studies of Britain between 1660 and 1832 emphasize the monarchy's fusion with Anglican religious orthodoxy and aristocratic culture as crucial to sustaining national stability amid the challenges of modernity. Clark argues that the monarchy, through symbolic rituals and moral leadership, preserved a sense of cultural unity and

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[217] Moh Abdul Hakim et al., "Monarchism, National Identity, and Social Representations of History in Indonesia: Intersections of the Local and National in the Sultanates of Yogyakarta and Surakarta," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 43, no. 6 (2015): 659–83.

[218] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

social hierarchy in periods of political and economic upheaval.[219] Both thinkers offer critical conceptual frameworks for this dissertation's analysis of the Thai monarchy's role in the twentieth century, demonstrating how royal authority historically operates as both a spiritual and political institution, capable of mediating tensions within rapidly modernizing, ethnically diverse societies like Thailand.

Extending these historical and theoretical insights into the 19th-century European context, David San Narciso's recent work on the Spanish monarchy further illustrates how royal institutions strategically repurpose historical symbolism to legitimize modern national identities. In his article *The Crown in National Disguises*, San Narciso examines how Spanish monarchs, particularly Queen Isabella II, mobilized medieval royal myths, religious imagery, and dynastic narratives to buttress a liberal-nationalist identity during Spain's fraught transition from absolutism to constitutional monarchy. He demonstrates how the monarchy's public ceremonies, patronage of religious institutions, and symbolic appeals to Spain's Catholic heritage were not mere relics of the past but active tools in reasserting royal authority and integrating diverse regional identities within a unified national framework.[220] This case bears striking parallels to the Thai monarchy's strategy during the Cold War period, where royal-sponsored rural development, Buddhist ritual patronage, and public imagery of benevolent kingship performed similar functions in stitching together a fragmented national landscape. San Narciso's study thus offers a

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[219] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[220] David San Narciso, "The Crown in National Disguises: The Uses of Monarchy's Historical Past in Spanish Nation-Building, 1833–1868," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 737–55.

valuable comparative lens through which to situate Thailand's mid-twentieth-century royalist nationalism within broader patterns of monarchical adaptation to modern state-building.

In the mid-20th Thailand, the monarchy did not merely survive the political transitions of the post-war period; it actively shaped national identity and regional cohesion through a careful balance of religious patronage, royalist nationalism, and localized engagement. This, in turn, supports the dissertation's central thesis: the assimilation of Northern and Northeastern ethnic minorities into a modern, post-war Thai nation-state was orchestrated not solely through state coercion or education, but through a deeply interwoven strategy of monarchy, religion, and cultural politics in both highland and lowland areas.

Dynastic Foundations and Sacred Authority

The Chakri Dynasty, founded in 1782 by King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok (Rama I), marked a pivotal era in Thai history, reshaping the kingdom's governance and identity. The dynasty moved its capital from Thonburi to Bangkok, where it has continued to reign for more than two centuries, ensuring the stability and continuity of the Thai monarchy through periods of both internal strife and external pressure. King Rama I (r. 1782-1809) laid the foundation for the modernization of Thailand, restoring Buddhism as a central unifying force in Thai society and reinforcing Thailand's cultural and political identity amidst threats from neighboring Burma.[221] His successors further expanded the influence and power of the monarchy. Particularly notable were King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), both of whom contributed to the westernization of Thailand that essentially allowed the southeast Asian kingdom to escape the western colonialism that entrapped its neighbors.

[221] David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, chap. 6.

King Mongkut (1851-1869) embraced diplomacy and adopted Western technologies, balancing modernization with Thailand's independence. King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) was renowned for his significant reforms. This included abolishing slavery, modernizing the administrative and legal systems, and fostering relationships with Western nations to ensure Thailand's sovereignty during an era of aggressive European colonization.[222] He is still venerated for these contributions, which helped Thailand avoid the fate of its neighbors under colonial rule. Historically, Thai kings engaged in various forms of patronage, particularly in Buddhist temple construction, infrastructure development, and education. King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, for example, funded the expansion of monastic education, supported public works projects, and initiated legal reforms aimed at modernizing Siam.[223] However, the idealized portrayal of royal benevolence often overlooks instances where such projects failed to meet their intended goals or were driven by political rather than purely altruistic motivations.[224]

Philanthropy under the Chakri dynasty was closely tied to legitimizing royal authority and reinforcing the monarchy's image as the moral and spiritual guardian of the nation. In many cases, the line between state policy and royal charity was blurred, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine acts of goodwill and calculated efforts to maintain social harmony and political stability. For instance, while King Rama V's abolition of slavery is often framed as an enlightened act of compassion, it also served as a strategy to modernize Siamese society and

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[222] David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, chap. 7; B.J. Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History: From the Fall of Ayutthaya to Recent Times* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005); Barend Jan Terwiel, "King Chulalongkorn as Builder of Incipient Siamese Nation-State." In *East Asia by Springer*, accessed September 2024.

[223] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 37-48.

[224] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 40-45.

consolidate central control over labor forces.[225] As for the reverence of the monarchy, it is important to note that while royal projects have fostered national pride and loyalty, they have also faced criticism. Some initiatives were perceived as out of touch with local realities or as mechanisms for reinforcing state control. The image of the monarch as a perfect, selfless benefactor has been carefully cultivated through state narratives, media, and royalist ideology, leaving little room for critical engagement.[226] That being said, there have been moments where the Thai public or segments of the bureaucracy have subtly questioned certain royal policies, particularly in the context of rural development and economic modernization.[227]

The monarchy's role as a national unifier became more pronounced in the 20th century. After the 1932 revolution, which transitioned Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one, the influence of the monarchy waned; however, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), who ascended to the throne in 1946, restored and revitalized the monarchy's status. Rama IX, whose reign was the longest in Thai history (1946-2016), is still remembered for his deep personal connection with the people, particularly through rural development projects and his ability to maintain Thailand's sovereignty during the Cold War era. During the political turmoil of the 1970s, 1990s, and early 2000s, King Bhumibol played a crucial role in

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[225] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 37-48; Barend Jan Terwiel, "Early Thai Printing: The Introduction of the Press in Siam," *Journal of the Siam Society* 66, no. 2 (1978): 125–186.

[226] James Buchanan, "The Darker Side of Thai Royalism," *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2016.

[227] Patrick Jory, "Thailand's Hyper-Royalism: Its Past Success and Present Predicament," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 79-103.

maintaining national unity.[228] His hands-on approach and commitment to national development through initiatives such as the "New Theory" of agriculture, which emphasized sustainability, helped bridge the gap between rural and urban populations.[229] His reign also withstood Thailand's rapid modernization post-World War II, maintaining the monarchy's central role as a symbol of Thai identity, a role that transcended regional identities and differences.

The female members of the Chakri Dynasty have also played pivotal roles both in shaping Thailand's political landscape and in contributing to social and cultural advancements. One of the most notable queens was Saovabha Phonsri (1864-1919), the wife of King Chulalongkorn and mother of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII). Queen Saovabha Phronsri was an influential advocate for women's education and empowerment. In 1897, while her husband was traveling abroad, she became the first queen to serve as the Thai regent, a significant achievement for women's representation in Thai leadership at the time. Her establishment of the Saovabha School for girls also set an important precedent for women's access to education in Thailand.[230]

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[228] Gregory B. Poling and Nicole Smolinske, "The Passing of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 14, 2016.

[229] Royal Thai Government, "ทฤษฎีใหม่และเครื่องกลเติมอากาศชัยพัฒนา," มูลนิธิชัยพัฒนา, เข้าถึงเมื่อวันที่ 22 กันยายน 2567. NAT/UB: Ubon Rachatani.

[230] Eksuda Singhalampong, "Picturing Femininity: Portraits of the Early Modern Siamese Women," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 3, no. 1 (2019): 49-75; Eksuda Singhalampong, "Western Dresses on the Oriental Bodies: Politics of Sartorial Manifestation and Unity of Siam," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,* edited Volume. (2018)

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Queen Saovabha was also a trailblazer in advocating for women's education and leadership. Her role as Thailand's first female regent in 1897 and her establishment of Saovabha School for Girls laid the foundation for female participation in governance and social advancement.[231] Building upon Queen Saovabha's pioneering efforts, the influence of female royals has extended far beyond ceremonial roles, shaping national identity and governance structures in profound ways. Her regency not only demonstrated the capacity of women to govern but also cemented a precedent for future royal women to assert political and social influence. This form of matriarchal governance found continuity in Queen Sirikit's decisive role in national development, where she championed cultural preservation and rural uplift, and in Princess Maha Chakri Sirinhorn's extensive work in education and minority integration. The legacy of Queen Saovabha's leadership established a framework in which female members of the monarchy have continued to exert soft power, reinforcing their roles as architects of national progress and societal transformation. This highlights an often-overlooked dimension of Thai monarchical history: the monarchy is not just a bastion of male dominance but a lineage where female power has been integral in shaping the modern Thai state.

Another key female royal figure in 20th century Thailand is Queen Sirikit (1932-present), the wife of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Queen Sirikit is widely revered for her efforts to preserve and promote Thai arts, culture, and crafts, particularly through the Support Foundation she established in 1976. This foundation has been instrumental in revitalizing traditional Thai handicrafts, providing economic opportunities for rural communities, especially women.[232]

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[231] Singhalampong, "Picturing Femininity."

[232] Glen Vivian Chatelier. "Queen Sirikit and traditional Thai arts and culture," *The International Journal of the Royal Society of Thailand (IJRST)*, 8 no. 1, (2016): 57–64; Dollaya

Queen Sirikit's role in representing Thailand on the international stage, especially during the Cold War era, also strengthened Thailand's diplomatic relations and showcased the resilience and grace of the monarchy as an institution.

Queen Sirikit's leadership extended beyond cultural preservation; it actively reinforced the monarchy's role in economic and political affairs, particularly in fostering female-driven economic empowerment. Her advocacy for Thai silk not only elevated the global image of Thai fashion but also positioned women as key agents of economic sustainability within the kingdom. By tying royal patronage to economic independence for rural woman, Queen Sirikit demonstrated a distinctly matriarchal approach to governance, one that sought to uplift through preservation rather than via direct political intervention. Her work, much like that of Queen Saovabha, illustrates the monarchy's tradition of integrating women's leadership into the very fabric of national identity, demonstrating female royals were not merely passive figures but active architects of Thailand's socio-political and economic landscape.

Princess Maha Chakri Sirinhorn (1955- present), affectionally known as "Phra Thep" or the "Princess of the People," has also been an influential figure within the Chakri Dynasty. Since the 1970s, she has devoted much of her work to education and rural development, emerging as a beloved and active member of the Thai royal family. She has played an integral role in supporting various social development projects, especially in remote highland areas where poverty is the norm. Her dedication to improving education and healthcare has been continuous

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Tiantong, "The Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and the Enhancement of Human Security in Northeast Thailand during the 1970s-1980s" (PhD dissertation, Chulalongkorn University, 2017); MAXIMAGE. *The Support Foundation of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand*. Published March 5, 2021.

since she earned her first degree in history from Chulalongkorn University in 1976. This degree has been followed by numerous other academic achievements, including her PhD in educational development in 1986. Her work has earned her international recognition, including the title of UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for her work with empowering minority children and preserving intangible heritage.[233]

Building upon her legacy of service, Princess Sirinhorn's approach to governance embodies a distinctly matriarchal influence, rooted in a philosophy of nurturing and direct engagement with marginalized communities. Unlike traditional notions of monarchy as a distant institution, her leadership is characterized by on-the-ground engagement, ensuring that the monarchy is not merely symbolic but is working to actively reshape Thai society. Her extensive work in education, minority empowerment, and cultural preservation highlights the enduring power of female leadership in Thailand's national development.[234] Princess Sirindhorn's role challenges the historical perception of monarchical power as solely male-dominated, proving that female agency within the Chakri dynasty has not only persisted but thrived as a cornerstone of modern Thai governance.

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[233] Wattananusit Prachark, "Story of the Thai Library Association under the Royal Patronage of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn" *現代の図書館* [Libraries today]/*日本図書館協会現代の図書館編集委員会 編* 50, no. 4 (2012): 268-274; Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, "History and Development of Thai Education ประวัติและพัฒนาการของการศึกษาไทย," in *Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects*, vol. 42, eds. (First online: November 2, 2018), 3-32.

[234] Pamona College, *About the Pamona College Special Convocation for Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn*. February 4, 2014. https://www.pomona.edu/sites/default/files/2014-convocationspecial-about.pdf?utm_source

Female members of the Chakri Dynasty, such has Queen Sirikit and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, have played crucial roles in embodying and promoting the concept of Thainess, especially during the Cold War when Thailand was working to counter communist influence in the North and Northeastern Isan region. Their goodwill efforts, focused on education, rural development, and cultural preservation, were seen as acts of royal maternalism, aligning with traditional Thai values and reinforcing the state's Thaification process. This was particularly significant in both highland and lowland ethnic minority communities, where matriarchal values prevailed. By championing projects that benefitted these communities, royal women helped integrate ethnic groups into the national identity, presenting Thainess as a unifying force against external threats. Their nurturing roles and influence in these regions were essential in promoting loyalty to the monarchy and reinforcing the state's anti-communist stance, making them key figures in both cultural preservation and national security effort.

The Chakri Dynasty has been instrumental not only in maintaining Thailand's sovereignty and navigating political changes but also in shaping the concept of Thainess, which has made the monarchy a powerful symbol of national identity. Kings like Mongkut and Chulalongkorn helped Thailand avoid colonization through strategic modernization, while King Bhumibol Adulyadej reestablished the monarchy's cultural authority during his reign. His rural development projects and moral leadership reasserted the power of the monarchy as a unifying institution amidst political turmoil. By promoting the monarchy as the embodiment of Thainess, the dynasty has also been crucial in the Thaification process. The monarchy has enabled the state to leverage royal symbolism to encourage loyalty and integration among ethnic minorities, reinforcing the monarchy's role as a central pillar of both Thai culture and national unity. This

process helped consolidate a collective identity while maintaining the monarchy's relevance in the face of Thailand's evolving political landscape during the Cold War era.

King Bhumibol's long reign (1946-2016) spanned a period of profound political turbulence and transformation in Thailand. Following the mysterious death of his brother, King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) in 1946, King Bhumibol ascended the throne during a time of instability.[235] The early years of his reign were marked by military dominance over Thai politics, with Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsonkhram, a key leader from the 1932 revolution that ended absolute monarchy, holding power. Phibunsongkhram's government was interrupted in 1947 by a military coup, followed by a series of additional coups that came to characterize Thai politics over the next decade.[236].

In 1957, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat staged a coup that ushered in an era of direct military rule. Sarit re-established the monarchy as a central figure of national unity, heavily promoting the king's role as moral leader.[237] This laid the groundwork for King Bhumibol's involvement in social and economic development. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Thailand

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[235] King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) was found dead in his bedroom at the Grand Palace on June 9, 1946, with a gunshot wound to the head. The circumstances surrounding his death remain unclear, leading to numerous theories, including accident, suicide, and assassination. The official investigation and subsequent trials resulted in the execution of three palace aides, though doubts persist regarding their guilt. Historians and scholars continue to debate the true cause of his death, making it one of Thailand's most enduring historical mysteries. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Love and Death of King Ananda Mahidol of Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 82, no. 4 (2023): 749-771.

[236] David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, chap. 9.

[237] Napawan Tantivejakul, "Thailand," in *Asian Perspectives on the Development of Public Relations: Other Voices, part of the National Perspectives on the Development of Public Relations* series, 128–143.

alternated back-and-forth between civilian and military governments, with coups in 1971 and again in 1976.[238] The latter coup followed a brief period of democracy that saw mass student protests and political unrest, culminating in the infamous Thammasat University massacre in October 1976.[239]

The communist threat, fueled by poverty and external influences from Vietnam, Laos, and China, also posed a challenge to national unity. King Bhumibol responded by implementing royal development projects aimed at improving rural infrastructure and education in marginalized areas. During the 1960s and 1970s, when mainland Southeast Asia was destabilized by the Vietnam War and America's secret wars in Laos and Cambodia, royal efforts in ethnic

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[238] These coups were led by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn. Andrew Keough, *Comparing the Economic Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Thailand and the Philippines* (masters thesis, New York University, 2018); David K. Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, chap. 9.

[239] The Thammasat University Massacre, which occurred on October 6, 1976, was a violent crackdown on pro-democracy student protesters at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. The students were demonstrating against the return of former military dictator Thanom Kittikachorn from exile, fearing a resurgence of military rule. The protest escalated after a student play was misinterpreted as a mock execution of the Thai royal family, leading to accusations of communist subversion. In response, right-wing paramilitary groups, police, and military forces stormed the university, indiscriminately shooting, lynching, and brutalizing students. Official reports listed 46 deaths, but estimates suggest the number may have been much higher, with hundreds injured and arrested. The massacre marked the end of Thailand's brief democratic experiment (1973–1976) and led to the establishment of an ultraconservative military government, plunging the country into another period of authoritarian rule. The event remains a sensitive and controversial chapter in Thai history, with continued debates over justice and state accountability. For further details, read Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020); Thongchai Winichakul, "Remembering/Silencing the Traumatic Past: The Ambivalent Memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, eds. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles Keyes (London: Routledge, 2002), 243-283.

minority regions became part of a broader strategy to counter communist influence and reinforce Thainess, positioning the monarchy as a unifying force against foreign intervention.[240] The king's initiatives played a crucial role in the state's Thaification process, integrating minority groups and promoting loyalty to the Thai state. By the 1980s, these efforts had successfully helped to stabilize the country, reducing insurgencies and ensuring that the monarchy remained central to national identity and unity.

By 1980, the Prem Tinsulanonda government came into power, marking the beginning of a more stable political era characterized by so-called "semi-democracy," where military leaders continued to exert influence behind a civilian facade.[241] Throughout these volatile years, King Bhumibol harnessed his royal development projects to position the monarchy as a stabilizing influence in northern and northeastern regions and to address socio-economic disparities through improvements in agriculture, irrigation, and healthcare. These efforts also supported the state's Thaification policies, integrating ethnic minorities into the national fabric. By visibly engaging with rural communities, King Bhumibol and the monarchy as an institution were seen not only as protectors of the people, but also as moral leaders guiding the country through decades of political upheaval. This perception of the monarchy as a benevolent, paternalistic force also reinforced the monarchy's role as a symbol of stability and continuity and contributed to its endurance amidst Thailand's numerous coups and transitions between military and civilian governments.

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[240] Thomas Andrew Marks, *Making Revolution: The Insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in Structural Perspective* (PhD diss., University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1991).

[241] Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (2018): 279–305.

While the monarchy worked to promote national unity, it also influenced the formation of distinct regional identities, particularly in northern and northeastern Thailand, highland and lowland. These regions, while part of the broader Thai state, historically maintained unique cultural practices, languages, and social structures. The monarchy's interactions with these regions were shaped by both its role as a unifying force and its need to assert and promote central authority.

Medicine, Maternalism, and the Making of Thainess in the Highlands

The influence of the Siamese monarchy in the northern highlands extends beyond the culture of the region's lowland inhabitants. Royal-sponsored projects in the northern highlands, such as agricultural initiatives, have contributed to the development of the region while promoting the monarchy's influence. One of the most significant initiatives was the Royal Project, initiated by King Bhumibol in 1969. The Royal Project began as part of the effort to replace opium cultivation with sustainable agricultural practices in the highlands. The Royal Project not only promoted agricultural modernization by introducing crops like vegetables, fruits, and coffee, but it also improved infrastructure in the form of schools and health services in highland communities.[242] This initiative helped align the region's development with national interests, fostering stronger ties to the monarchy. The region's strong connection to Buddhism, further reinforced by royal patronage of temples and monastic institutions, also helped align northern highland Thailand's identity with the broader vision of a unified, Buddhist Thai nation. Royal patronage of Buddhist temples and monastic institutions was a crucial factor in reinforcing

[242] "Strategies of Highland Development in Thailand," *FFTC Agricultural Policy Platform*. Last modified August 9, 2019. https://ap.fftc.org.tw/article/1275.

Northern Thailand's integration into the broader vision of a unified Thai nation.[243] The king's visits to temples and his direct involvement in the restoration and funding of religious sites helped spread royal influence and deepen the connection between northern communities and the central Thai state. Together, these initiatives reflected the monarchy's role in economic and agricultural development in the highlands and, more importantly, in the cultural and religious integration of the region into the Thai nation-state.

Before the twentieth century, the Thai monarchy had limited direct engagement with highland regions as these areas were often viewed as peripheral to the central state; however, during the early Rattanakosin period, the monarchy exerted influence through tributary relationships with powerful local rulers, particularly in the northern Lanna kingdom and other semi-autonomous principalities. These relationships were maintained through symbolic displays of loyalty, tax collection, and military cooperation rather than direct administrative control.[244] Unlike in lowland regions, where irrigation and temple construction were major royal initiatives, the highlands lacked significant state-led infrastructural development due to difficult terrain, lower population density, and their perceived strategic unimportance. It was only in the mid-20th century, particularly during the Cold War, that the Thai monarchy intensified its involvement,

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[243] Ruth Streicher, "Imperialism, Buddhism and Islam in Siam: Exploring the Buddhist Secular in the Nangsue Sadaeng Kitchanukit, 1867," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2021): 7–25, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463421000126.

[244] Bundit Chulasai and Ratchada Chotipanich, "Monthon: The Provincial Administration of Siam," *Sripatum Review of Humanities and Social Sciences* 21, no. 2 (2021): 179–192; "The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892–1915. The Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab," *Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (1979): 437–457; "Thai Regional Elites and the Reforms of King Chulalongkorn," *Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no. 4 (1970): 863–881.

framing development projects as both a means of improving livelihoods and countering communist influence. This shift marked a departure from previous indirect rule, as the monarchy became a central actor in integrating highland minorities into the nation-state.

Princess Srinagarindra's efforts, particularly in healthcare, focused on bridging the gap between urban and rural health services in the highland.[245] She established mobile clinics and permanent healthcare facilities in these regions, addressing a critical shortage of medical infrastructure. Her projects were not just about providing medical services but also about integrating these communities into the nation's development narrative. By improving healthcare access, the monarchy demonstrated its direct involvement in the well-being of the Thai people, including ethnic minorities. This naturally strengthened the connection between ethnic groups and the Thai state. Improvements in public health contributed to a stronger national identity, as communities that had once felt alienated began to see themselves as part of the broader Thai nation.

[245] Princess Srinagarindra (1900-1995), formally known as Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra, the Princess Mother, was the mother of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) and King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII). Unlike most members of the Thai royal family, she came from a modest background. Born Sangwan Talapat in Nonthaburi, she was the daughter of a goldsmith and was educated initially in nursing and public health. Her life changed when she received a royal scholarship to study nursing in the United States, where she later married Prince Mahidol of Songkhla, a key reformer of modern Thai medicine. Drawing on her medical training and personal experience, Princess Srinagarindra became a central figure in promoting healthcare, education, and welfare in remote and marginalized areas, particularly in the northern highlands. From the 1950s onward, she supported rural medical units, mobile clinics, and health education programs, earning her the affectionate title *Mae Fah Luang* ("Royal Mother from the Sky"). In this research, her work is significant because it illustrates how royal-led healthcare initiatives functioned as a soft instrument of integration, bringing state presence, care, and loyalty into peripheral regions where formal state institutions had previously been weak or absent.

These healthcare initiatives were intertwined with other infrastructure projects, such as building schools, roads, and irrigation systems. These developments were part of the larger national agenda of Thaification, which sought to assimilate diverse ethnic groups into a unified Thai identity while still respecting their unique cultural characteristics. The monarchy's support for these initiatives helped foster loyalty to the state, positioning the royal family as both a protector and a benefactor of ethnic minority communities.

In addition to healthcare, the construction of roads and schools was crucial for integrating highland communities into the national economy and culture. Roads soon connected these remote areas to major urban centers, facilitating exchanges of goods, services, and ideas. Schools, often built with royal patronage, provided not only education but also a space for teaching the Thai language and spreading national values. Through these educational institutions, the monarchy promoted a shared national consciousness that transcended ethnic divisions. The monarchy's healthcare and infrastructure projects in the highlands were not only about improving living conditions but also about crafting a narrative of national unity. These initiatives reflected the broader national strategy of integration, fostering a sense of belonging among ethnic minorities and reinforcing the monarchy's role as the central pillar of Thainess.

The Mae Song Son Highland Visits and the Performance of Thainess

In the highlands of the northern region, the Thai monarchy launched various projects and programs to help promote an emerging and increasingly unified Thai identity via social and economic programs. On a January 5, 1968, visit, Charles Keyes remarked that the Thai royal family's visits to Mae Hong Son and various villages in the highlands, as well as their sponsorship of rural development initiatives, were significant when it came to encouraging a unified Thai identity. This influence was particularly pronounced among the ethnic minorities of

the highlands. These efforts included the king's presentation of Buddha images, which fostered loyalty and religious unity through Buddhism, as well as his promotion of infrastructure projects, such as roads and schools, to integrate the isolated highland communities into the broader national framework.[246] With a single visit, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit not only promoted the monarchy as one of the three pillars of Thai identity, but also endorsed Buddhism and advocated for Thainess via improved access to education and development of infrastructure. Royal development programs bolstering education and infrastructure played a vital role in promoting Thainess among ethnic minorities of the highland like the Karen and the Hmong people. By fostering loyalty to the state and encouraging religious and cultural cohesion, the monarchy's efforts symbolized a broader national strategy to integrate remote communities into a unified Thai identity while also preserving regional ethnic identities.

These royal visits were meticulously organized, involving local elites, officials, and representatives from different ethnic groups, like the Karen, Shan, Lisu, and Lahu. The King personally engaged with local people, strengthening ties between the monarchy and ethnic populations. Furthermore, royal projects were linked with modern healthcare initiatives, as seen in the construction of new hospitals, which showcased the monarchy's emphasis on improving living conditions in these remote areas.

Between 1950 and 1980, Thailand saw substantial growth in healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural and highland regions. As part of the national development strategy, this aspect of the royal agenda aimed to improve public health and enhance rural access to medical services. By 1980, the government focus shifted to expanding healthcare through rural hospitals

[246] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: 1968-01 (January 1968), Mae Sariang*, with entries by E. Jane Keyes (University of Washington Libraries, 2012).

to meet the needs of underserved populations in remote areas, especially in the northern highlands among ethnic minority groups. Statistics show that during this period, the country increased its network of hospitals significantly, and by 1970, there were around 600 newly built government hospitals across Thailand. More than 300 of these were built to serve the needs of highland populations in the north.[247]

Princess Srinagarindra, the Princess Mother, was particularly involved in the establishment of rural health services, including mobile clinics and permanent healthcare facilities. Her work helped address the healthcare gap between urban and rural areas.[248] The Thai monarchy's visits to the northern highlands were carefully choreographed to foster closer relationships between the monarchy and ethnic minority groups, including the Karen, Shan, Hmong, Lisu, and Lahu. These royal efforts were not only about healthcare and development but were deeply intertwined with Thainess and identity as the monarchy and the state sought to unify diverse ethnic populations under a shared sense of Thainess. The construction of over 300 hospitals in the highlands between 1950 and 1980 symbolized the monarchy's dedication to integrating these groups into the national identity. This emphasis on healthcare and infrastructure, championed by figures like the Princess Mother Srinagarindra, reinforced the Thai state's narrative of a unified nation, bridging the gaps between remote highland communities and the central government.

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[247] Royal Project Foundation (มูลนิธิโครงการหลวง), "Royal Project Healthcare Establishment in Northern Thailand (การจัดตั้งโครงการหลวงด้านสาธารณสุขในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย)," *Royal Gazette* (ราชกิจจานุเบกษา), Box. 84, Folder. 45, 1967, National Archives, Bangkok.

[248] Royal Project Foundation (มูลนิธิโครงการหลวง), "Princess Mother Srinagarindra Healthcare Facilities in Mae Hong Son (สถานพยาบาลสมเด็จพระศรีนครินทราบรมราชชนนีในจังหวัดแม่ฮ่องสอน)," *Royal Gazette* (ราชกิจจานุเบกษา), Box. 85, folder. 12, 1967, National Archives, Bangkok.

Healthcare expansion efforts included building small district hospitals in highland regions, which were complemented by community health centers aimed at serving remote areas. Many of these hospitals were part of a broader strategy to strengthen infrastructure in the northern provinces and to integrate ethic minority communities into the national framework. These initiatives were aligned with Thailand's focus on national security and modernization, driven by both domestic development goals and Cold War-era geopolitics.[249]

Each ethnic group in the highlands responded differently to the visits of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit during their tour of Mae Hong Son in 1968. The Shan, who were dominant in Mae Hong Son, embraced the royal visit as an opportunity to highlight their cultural identity. They organized performances of traditional Shan dances, which were appreciated by the Queen, symbolizing their acceptance of the monarchy's role in fostering a unified national identity.[250] The Shan's historical ties to the Thai royal family trace back to the reign of King Naresuan Maharaj during the Ayutthaya period. In the late 16th century, King Naresuan maintained familial military connections with the Shan people during his campaigns against Burma. This shared history laid the foundation for a continued sense of loyalty and cultural respect between the Shan and the Thai monarchy.[251] By highlighting their cultural identity through cultural

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[249] Ministry of Interior (กระทรวงมหาดไทย), "Policy on Countering Communism during the Cold War (นโยบายต่อต้านลัทธิคอมมิวนิสต์ในช่วงสงครามเย็น)," *Royal Gazette* (ราชกิจจานุเบกษา), boxl. 83, folder. 27, 1966, NAT, Bangkok.

[250] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: 1968-01 (January 1968), Mae Sariang*, with entries by E. Jane Keyes (University of Washington Libraries, 2012).

[251] Su Su Khin, Nathanarin Methivuthinan Phanuphatharathanavat, Catthaleeya Aungthongkamnerd, and Truong Thi Hang, "Tai Yai Identity in Arunothai, Mueang Na, Chiang Dao, Chiangmai" (Conference paper, The First International Conference on Languages and Humanities, Yangoon University, January 6-7, 2020).

performances, the Shan not only honored their relationship with the royal family but also reaffirmed their place within the broader narrative of Thai nationalism. Thus, the Shan response to the royal visit reflected their deep-rooted historical ties to the monarchy, celebrating their distinct cultural heritage while further solidifying their place in the emerging Thai identity.

On the other hand, the Karen, who are known for their distinct religious and cultural practices, had mixed reactions. Many Karen leaders welcomed the visit and participated in the festivities, presenting the King with traditional items like bronze drums. Others were more reserved, particularly those adhering to Christian or animist beliefs. The royal effort to engage with these communities by distributing Buddha images and promoting Buddhism was met with polite respect, but it did not always align with the Karen's religious diversity.[252]

Evidence suggests that while open resentment was rare, the royal encounters did generate moments of quiet tension and religious discomfort among some Karen communities, particularly Christian converts. Ethnographic studies indicate that Buddhist royal gifts, such as the Buddha images, were sometime received with polite deference rather than genuine acceptance, reflecting Karen strategies of respectful accommodation rather than ideological alignment.[253] For Christian Karen, especially those influenced by American and European missionary networks, these objects could interpreted as idols, conflicting with Christian teachings, even if this discomfort

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[252] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: 1968-01 (January 1968), Mae Sariang*, with entries by E. Jane Keyes (University of Washington Libraries, 2012).

[253] Charles F. Keyes, *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier* (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1979); Yoko Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2004).

was rarely expressed openly.[254] Rather than overt irritation, responses were often marked by silence, selective participation, or symbolic compliance. Scholars such as Charles F. Keyes note that royal initiatives, though well intentioned, were occasionally perceived as operating through a lowland Buddhist moral framework that did not fully account for highland religious pluralism, creating a subtle sense that the monarchy was culturally distant rather than deliberately insensitive.[255] Thus, the royal family was not broadly seen as out of touch, but these encounters reveal the limits of Buddhism-centered integration and highlight how loyalty and reverence could coexist with religious ambivalence.

Among the Lahu and Hmong, smaller ethnic groups, the ceremonies met with enthusiasm. The Queen's interest in their vibrant attire and customs was noted, and the Lahu responded by showcasing their traditional clothing and practices.[256] Despite their remote and marginalized status, the Lahu saw the royal visit as a rare chance to interact with national leaders, thus reinforcing the monarchy's image as a unifying force even among Thailand's most isolated ethnic minorities. According to Keyes, the Hmong, like the Lahu, viewed the Queen's visit as a momentous affirmation of Thailand's matriarchal authority.[257] As the embodiment of both maternal care and national unity, Queen Sirikit's presence symbolized the supreme role of

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[254] Ronald D. Renard, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study of Anthropology and Ethnicity* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001).

[255] Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1987): 551–567.

[256] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: 1968-01 (January 1968), Mae Sariang*, with entries by E. Jane Keyes (University of Washington Libraries, 2012).

[257] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: 1968-01 (January 1968), Mae Sariang*, with entries by E. Jane Keyes (University of Washington Libraries, 2012).

the Thai monarchy in guiding and integrating ethnic communities into the fabric of the nation. In preparation, the Hmong meticulously curated their finest traditional performances and adorned themselves in elaborate, hand-stitched attire, demonstrating their reverence for the Queen as the matriarch of the Thai nation. The Queen's recognition of their cultural expressions was not merely an act of diplomacy but a powerful reinforcement of her role as the unifying mother of the Thai state. Thus, for the Hmong, this event promoted a profound sense of belonging and allegiance to her and the Thai nation as the ultimate maternal figure in the kingdom.

In terms of the Cold War, for highland communities like the Hmong, the experience of Cold War politics was complex. While their anti-communist stance might have aligned them with the Thai government, many still viewed state interventions with suspicion. The military presence in the highlands, coupled with counterinsurgency operations, often disrupted traditional ways of life and led to further displacement.[258] Additionally, the Thai government's efforts to exert control over highland groups through restrictions on shifting cultivation and resettlement programs sometimes alienated them further. For some, alignment with the Thai state was a strategic necessity for survival, while others sought greater autonomy to avoid political

[258] The Hmong communities in Thailand experienced significant upheaval during the Cold War due to their involvement in regional conflicts and the Thai government's counterinsurgency efforts. While many Hmong aligned themselves with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the 1960s and 1970s, others supported anti-communist initiatives. Regardless of their political stance, these communities often viewed state interventions with suspicion. The military's presence in highland areas, coupled with counterinsurgency operations, disrupted traditional ways of life and led to displacement. These interventions not only altered the socio-cultural fabric of Hmong society but also contributed to a complex relationship between the Hmong and the Thai state, marked by mistrust and the struggle to maintain cultural identity amidst political turmoil. For more details please read: Ian G. Baird, "The Communist Party of Thailand's Education for Young Children in Northern Laos and Southern China," *South East Asia Research* 32, no. 3 (2024): 283–303

entanglements. The legacy of these Cold War interactions continues to shape highland-Thai relations, influencing contemporary policies on citizenship, land rights, and ethnic identity.

King Bhumibol's reign was instrumental in promoting national integration, bridging regional divides, and fostering a sense of unified identity in Thailand. His development initiatives, particularly in rural and highland areas, helped align diverse communities with the national narrative of Thainess while reinforcing the monarchy's role as a stabilizing and unifying force. Through large-scale development projects focused on agriculture, infrastructure, and education, ethnic minority groups in the highlands were integrated into the national framework. While these efforts improved economic conditions and health outcomes, they also exerted a subtle yet powerful influence on cultural identity: the state's narrative of Thainess gradually took precedence over regional and ethnic identities.

Dara Rasami and the Gendered Politics of Lanna Lowland Integration

In northern Thailand, a region historically connected to the Lanna Kingdom, the relationship between the monarchy and local lowland Lanna elites helped integrate the region into the Thai state. The Lanna Kingdom, a semi-autonomous region with its own rulers, culture, and dialect, was gradually incorporated into Siam, in the late 19th century, following the signing of treaties and administrative reforms under King Chulalongkorn. A key figure in the process was Princess Dara Rasami, a Lanna princess and daughter of King Inthawichayanon of Chiang Mai, who became a royal consort to King Chulalongkorn in 1886.[259] Her marriage symbolized

[259] Federico Ferrara, *Thailand Unhinged: The Death of Thai-Style Democracy* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2011), 119-120; Aurel Croissant and Philip Lorenz, "Thailand: The Vicious Cycle of Civilian Government and Military Rule," in *Comparative Politics of Southeast Asia* (Cham: Springer, 2018); A. Prompanjai, "The Problems of Democratization of Thai Bureaucratic Polity in Semi-Democracy Regime (1980–1988)

the political and cultural alliance between Lanna elite and the Siamese court, strengthening the ties between the northern region and the central monarchy. This process of integration was not solely achieved through military conquest or administrative centralization, but through a complex negotiation between the central monarchy and local elites with Princess Dara Rasami acting as a significant bridge between the two.

Princess Dara Rasami's marriage to King Chulalongkorn carried profound cultural significance beyond political alliance, symbolizing the merging of Lanna and Siam, a crucial step toward the formation of a more unified Thai state and the "Thaification" of Lanna. This integration of Lanna into Siamese identity can be seen in literature as well, such as in Mon Rajawonse Kukrit Pramoj's famous novel *Four Reigns*, published in a monograph format in 1953. Set during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the novel tells the story of Mae Phloi, a lady in waiting growing up within the inner palace in Bangkok. Mae Phloi describes the diverse groups living in the inner palaces, including a beautiful queen consort who spoke in an elegant northern dialect, likely a reference to a Lanna noblewoman or even to Princess Dara Rasami herself.[260] This portrayal of a northern consort and her ladies highlights how Lanna lowland nobility became integrated into the Bangkok court, contributing to the evolving concept of Thainess, thus underscoring the unifying power of the monarchy. The presence of Princess Dara Rasami in the Siamese court was a visible reminder of the enduring ties between the northern kingdom and the central government. While Dara Rasami introduced Lanna customs, language,

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(ปัญหาของการทำให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยของระบอบการเมืองแบบข้าราชการในยุคกึ่งประชาธิปไตย พ.ศ. 2523–2531)," *Journal of Politics and Governance* 6, no. 2 (2023): 287–308.

[260] Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, trans. Tulachandra (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 1953), 40.

and traditions to the capital, her role as a royal consort also allowed her to mediate between the two cultures, fostering mutual understanding and cultural exchange between Lanna and Siam.

The political marriage of Princess Dara Rasami of Lanna to King Chulalongkorn is a key example of how matriarchal figures mediated regional integration from peripheral lowland regions into the central Thai monarchy. She played a pivotal role in incorporating northern Lanna identity into the Chakri dynasty, setting a precedent for female royals as cultural and political mediators. Through her presence in the royal court, she facilitated dialogue between the Lanna elite and the central Thai administration, ensuring that northern customs and traditions were acknowledged within the broader framework of the Thai state. Her influence extended beyond cultural representation, as she actively supported policies that integrated Lanna governance into the national structure, reinforcing the monarchy's role in unifying the diverse regions of Thailand.

The integration of Dara Rasami into the Thai royal court exemplifies how the monarchy historically played a key role in national unity through strategic marriages. However, she was not the only minority consort with political significance. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and his successors married women from various regions, including Lao, Malay, and Mon backgrounds, to strengthen central authority and ensure the allegiance of peripheral lowland territories.[261] The

[261] These marriages were deliberate efforts to integrate diverse ethnic groups into the Siamese polity, reinforcing central authority and fostering allegiance among peripheral regions. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and his successors strategically married women from various backgrounds to secure the loyalty of regional elites, such as Princess Consort Mom Chao Malai of Ubon of Lao descent, and Mom Rajawongse Nueng Malakul of Mon heritage. From the south, Mom Chao Sanae, a noblewoman of Malay descent, represented efforts to stabilize the borderlands, while Princess Suchitra of Cambodian royal lineage-maintained Siam's influence over its former vassal. These alliances were not merely symbolic; they facilitated political integration, cultural exchange, and religious patronage within the court, smoothing transitions for

royal harem functioned as both a political tool and a mechanism for consolidating the kingdom, creating a network of regional ties that reinforced Bangkok's control over diverse ethnic groups.

The visibility of queens in national development projects raises important questions about gendered responsibilities in the monarchy. While kings focused on state-building efforts like road construction, administrative reforms, and temple patronage, queens—particularly those of the modern era like Queen Saovabha Phongsri and Queen Sirikit—were often at the forefront of education, public health, and cultural preservation. These roles suggest a division of labor where kings embodied the state's authority and infrastructure, while queens engaged in community-building initiatives that emphasized social welfare.[262] This dynamic not only reinforced traditional gender roles but also allowed queens to serve as intermediaries between the monarchy and the people, particularly among women and marginalized communities.

From Sexual Liminality to Royal Order: Bun Bang Fai and the Reconfiguration of Isan Ritual Life

Northeastern Thailand, or Isan, presents a more complex case. Historically marginalized and culturally distinct due to its ties to Laos, Isan has often been viewed as peripheral to the Thai state. However, during his 1955 visit, when King Bhumibol Adulyadej personally visited the

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regional elites into Bangkok's administration. While the monarchy is often perceived as ethnically homogenous, its historical use of strategic marriages underscores a nuanced reality of governance through diplomacy and incorporation. Leslie Castro-Woodhouse, *Woman Between Two Kingdoms: Dara Rasami and the Making of Modern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021); Leslie Woodhouse, "Concubines with Cameras: Royal Siamese Consorts Picturing Femininity and Ethnic Difference in Early 20th Century Siam," *Trans-Asia Photography Review* 9, no. 2 (2019).

[262] Kanjana Hubik Thepboriruk, "Dear Thai Sisters: Propaganda, Fashion, and the Corporeal Nation under Phibunsongkhram," *Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (August 22, 2019): 233-258.

region, he recognized its agricultural difficulties, particularly its struggles with drought and poverty. In response, he initiated 1969's Royal Rainmaking Project, aiming to alleviate drought and improve agricultural productivity. Traditionally, Isan farmers relied on the *Bang Fai* rocket festival to implore the gods for rain, reflecting the region's deep cultural ties to nature.[263] However, through King Bhumibol's technological interventions, such as artificial rain via cloud seeding, the monarchy became a more modern provider for the region, effectively intertwining royal development projects with Isan's identity.[264] This project, alongside other royal initiatives,

[263] Royal Project Office, *Documentation on the Royal Rainmaking Project* (โครงการพระราชดำริฝนหลวง), NAT: Bangkok, 1969, Box 45, Folder 3, Royal Palace Projects.

[264] Cloud seeding, a weather modification technique, involves dispersing substances such as silver iodide or sodium chloride into clouds to stimulate precipitation. King Bhumibol's Royal Rainmaking Project, initiated in the 1950s, addressed drought conditions in Isan and other arid regions by enhancing rainfall to support agriculture and water resources. This innovation not only alleviated water scarcity but also reinforced the monarchy's role as a benevolent and technologically progressive provider, deepening its connection with rural communities reliant on rainfall for their livelihoods. Royal Project Office, *Documentation on the Royal Rainmaking Project* (โครงการพระราชดำริฝนหลวง), National Archives, Bangkok, 1969, Box 45, Folder 3, Royal Palace Projects.

fostered loyalty to the crown, but despite these efforts, Isan's regional identity has remained

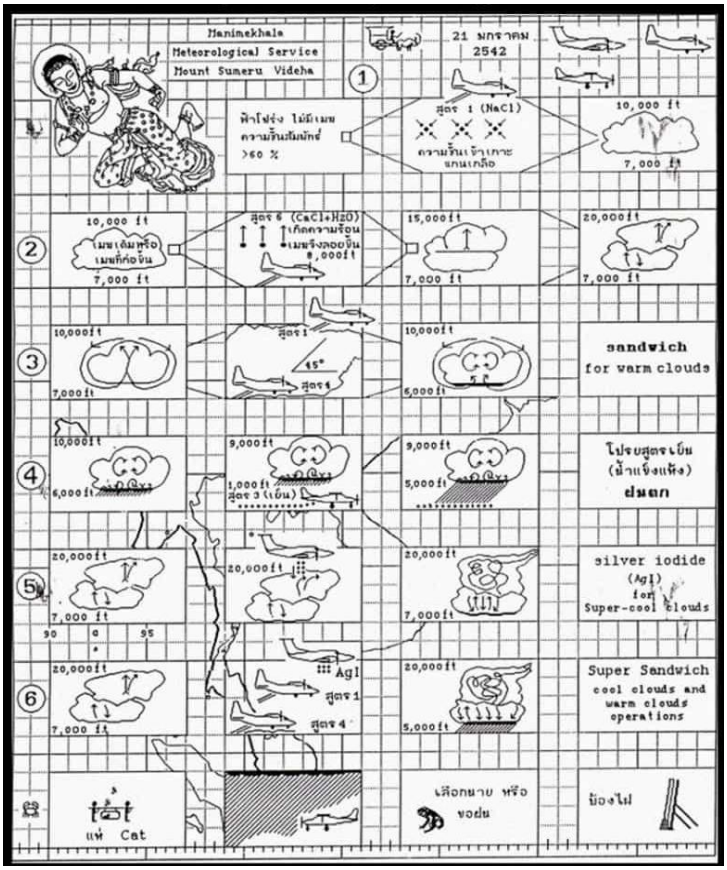

Figure 4: The Royal Rain Project in Thailand, 1970.

This diagram illustrates the process behind the *Royal Rainmaking Project* initiated in Thailand by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The diagram is organized into six distinct steps depicting how artificial rain is generated through cloud seeding, using aircraft to disperse chemical agents into the clouds. Cloud Selection: The initial step involves identifying the appropriate cloud formations-depicted here as "warm Clouds". Chemical Dispersion: The next stage involves using aircraft to disperse cloud-seeding chemicals like silver iodide or salt. In this diagram, "sandwich for warm clouds" refers to layers of chemicals released to trigger rain formation. Interaction with clouds: The seeding process creates a chain reaction within the clouds, shown by arrows and icons representing clouds and chemical reactions. This is where the project employs technique such as "super sandwich," which combines warm and cold cloud seeding. Rainfall Induction: As the process unfolds, rainfalls initiated, and this phase shows the movement of water-laden clouds toward target areas. Impact on Agricultural Lands: The final phase results in rain that nourishes crops, ensuring agricultural sustainability in drought-prone regions. The bottom right corner shows rain symbolically watering crops. The diagram highlights the innovation use of meteorological science to combat drought in Thailand, reflecting the King's dedication to improving rural livelihoods through sustainable water management. Source: *เทคโนโลยีฝนหลวง* (Royal Rainmaking Technology), Department of Royal Rainmaking and Agricultural Aviation, printed 1970, National Archives, Ubon Ratchathani.

distinct, with royal initiatives often viewed as state-driven assimilation rather than organic integration like seen in the northern region.

In 1963, six years before the establishment of the Royal Rainmaking Project, Charles F. Keyes documented the Fire Rocket Ceremony in Mahasarakham. Keyes observed that the festival, deeply rooted in Thai Isan communities and shared by ethnic groups like the Phu Thai and Khmer, was a vibrant expression of spiritual devotion. It featured transvestic attire symbolizing sexual fluidity, a reflection of Hindu origins distinct from the region's dominant Buddhism.[265] However, by 1969, the monarchy's increasing promotion of patriarchy and Westernization caused these expressions of sexual fluidity to begin to fade. The Royal Rainmaking Project and similar royal development initiatives reinforced state-led modernization efforts that aligned with traditional gender norms and nationalism, thus reducing the space for non-conforming identities in public rituals. The ceremony's once-fluid sexual symbolism was gradually suppressed as royal influence and development of the region through science reshaped cultural practices in Isan, aligning them more closely with state-driven notions of Thai identity and order.

The presence of transvestic dress in 1960's Fire Rocket Ceremony in Northeastern Thailand, particularly among men, is a key feature of the rituals of sexual symbolism at the time. This festival, rooted in Hindu tradition rather than Buddhist practices, incorporated overt displays of gender fluidity and fertility symbolism, both of which are central to the ceremony's

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[265] Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: April 1963, Mahasarakham*, April 1963, Ban Nong Tun, Amphoe Muang, Mahasarakham Province, accessed November 16, 2011; Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: June 1963, Mahasarakham, Roi Et*, June 1963, Ban Nong Tun, Amphoe Muang, Mahasarakham Province, accessed November 16, 2011; Charles F. Keyes, *Field Notes, Thailand: October 1963, Mahasarakham,* October 1963, Mahasarakham Province, accessed November 16, 2011.

purpose of invoking rain from the gods. The appearance of cross-dressing in such rituals can be traced back to Hindu fertility rites, where sexual expressions and the blurring of gender roles symbolized the fluidity of natural forces like rain, which is essential for fertility and agricultural abundance.

The Fire Rocket Ceremony historically served as an invocation for rain, crucial for the lowland, rice-growing Isan. The rockets launched into the sky become both literal and symbolic representations of phallic power aimed at penetrating the heavens to release rain. The sexual symbolism is thus deeply entwined with the ritual's agricultural and cosmic purposes, reinforcing fertility, abundance, and renewal. Cross-dressing and other sexually suggestive performances, including jokes and ribaldry, are common in this festival, reflecting a sense of liminality, where societal norms are temporarily subverted to ensure the success of the ritual.[266] Given that the festival is of Hindu Khmer-Khrom origin, it carries with it influences from pre-Buddhist animist and Hindu traditions where such performances were seen as offerings to deities responsible for fertility and weather. Over time, while the region became predominantly Buddhist, these older, non-Buddhist elements of the festival persisted, providing a unique blend of religious practices that contrasted with mainstream Thai Buddhism. Mainstream Thai Buddhism tends to have stricter gender norms resulting from its association with the king as father of the nation and the queen as the nation's mother. By the 1970s, as Isan society modernized under the influence of the monarchy and state-driven projects like the Royal Rain Projects, the overt sexual symbolism and expressions of gender-fluidity seen in these rituals

[266] Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 1989), 63-93.

became less prominent, some even completely abandoned as lowland ethnic groups of Isan attempted to negotiate the westernization and modernization that Thainess represented. This change reflected broader societal shifts toward more conservative interpretations of gender and sexuality across Thailand.

Institutionalizing Thainess: Monarchy, Military, and Sangha in Regional Governance

Key institutions tied to the monarchy, such as the military, the bureaucracy, and the Buddhist Sangha, played crucial roles in shaping both national and regional identities. These institutions functioned as extensions of the monarchy's influence, reinforcing its position as the central authority in Thai society. The Thai military has historically aligned closely with the monarchy, particularly during periods of political instability. Military coups in 1932, 1947, and 1957 resulted in governments that often positioned themselves as defenders of the monarchy. Military leaders frequently invoked royal authority to legitimize their actions, thus intertwining the fate of the state with the monarchy's continued centrality. In regional contexts, the military was deployed to suppress local resistance, particularly in Northeastern Thailand where communist movements were prominent during the Cold War. The military's presence in these regions was often supported by the bureaucracy, which reinforced the monarchy's role as the ultimate authority and served to further integrate these areas into the national fold.

During the Cold War, the rise of communism had a profound impact on ethnic communities in northern and northeastern Thailand, shaping their relationship with the Thai state. In the north, the Hmong, many of whom had fought alongside the United States in Vietnam and Laos against communist forces, were viewed with suspicion by the Thai military, even as some sought closer ties with the state for protection. Their anti-communist stance meant that they were both recruited for counterinsurgency operations and, at times, targeted due to fears of

foreign infiltration.[267] Meanwhile, communist movements in the northeast, particularly in Isan, attracted significant support from ethnic Lao-speaking minorities who had long been marginalized by Bangkok's centralization policies.[268] The Thai military, deeply aligned with the monarchy, responded with force, deploying troops to suppress local resistance and establish

[267] During the Cold War, the rise of communism significantly affected ethnic communities in northern and northeastern Thailand, particularly the Hmong. In Laos, the Hmong were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to combat North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao communist forces. They played critical roles in guerrilla warfare, intelligence gathering, and rescuing downed American pilots. However, within Thailand, the Hmong community's relationship with the state was complex. While some Hmong individuals aligned with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), influenced by transnational connections and broadcasts from Laos, others sought closer ties with the Thai government for protection against communist insurgencies. This duality led to a precarious position for the Hmong, as they were both recruited for counterinsurgency operations and viewed with suspicion by Thai authorities due to fears of foreign infiltration. The Thai military's counterinsurgency efforts in Hmong-populated areas were thus marked by a combination of recruitment and repression, reflecting the community's ambivalent status during this turbulent period. Yos Santasombat, "The Hmong and the Communist Party of Thailand: A Transnational, Transcultural, and Gender-Relations-Transforming Experience," *Trans: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 1–20.

[268] During the Cold War, communist movements in Thailand's northeastern region, particularly in Isan, garnered significant support from ethnic Lao-speaking minorities who had long been marginalized by Bangkok's centralization policies. The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) found fertile ground among these communities, as they faced economic hardships and political disenfranchisement. The CPT's insurgency, which lasted from 1965 to 1983, was partly fueled by the grievances of these minorities against the central Thai government's neglect and assimilation efforts. The movement received support from neighboring communist parties, including those in Laos and Vietnam, further strengthening its position in the region. The Thai government's response involved military interventions and development projects aimed at countering the insurgency and integrating Isan more effectively into the national framework. These efforts were driven by objectives to suppress communism, exploit natural resources, and incorporate Isan more effectively into the central Thai state. For further details, Michael Leifer, "Factors Influencing Relations between the Communist Parties of Thailand and Laos," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 3 (1970): 256–264.

tighter administrative control over these border regions.[269] The military presence, coupled with state-backed development projects and royal initiatives, served to integrate these areas more fully into the national fold. However, for many ethnic minorities, particularly the Hmong, the legacy of Cold War conflicts fostered an enduring distrust of the state, leading some groups to seek further autonomy rather than deeper assimilation.

The spread of communism in Southeast Asia during the Cold War had a profound impact on northern and northeastern ethnic communities in Thailand. Many highland groups, including the Hmong, found themselves entangled in regional conflicts, as their counterparts in Vietnam and Laos were directly involved in anti-communist struggles. The Hmong in Laos and Vietnam, for instance, were recruited as allies by the United States in the Secret War in Laos, where they fought against communist forces.[270] As a result, following the fall of Laos to the communists in

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[269] The Thai military, closely aligned with the monarchy, actively engaged in counterinsurgency operations to suppress communist movements, particularly in the northeastern region of Isan. The military's approach combined forceful suppression of local resistance with efforts to establish tighter administrative control over border areas. This strategy was part of a broader nation-building process aimed at integrating peripheral regions into the central Thai state and countering the influence of communist insurgents. The military's actions were often justified by the need to protect national sovereignty and maintain internal stability, reflecting the intertwined relationship between the armed forces and the monarchy in Thailand's political landscape. For more details, Sinae Hyun, *Indigenizing the Cold War: Nation-Building by the Border Patrol Police in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021).

[270] The Secret War in Laos was a covert U.S. military campaign during the Vietnam War aimed at containing communism and countering the North Vietnamese Army and the Pathet Lao. Largely hidden from public view, the operation relied heavily on the Hmong, an ethnic minority group recruited by the CIA for their knowledge of the mountainous terrain and their opposition to communist forces. Under the leadership of General Vang Pao, Hmong fighters carried out guerrilla operations, rescued downed American pilots, and disrupted supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Following the U.S. withdrawal in 1975, the Pathet Lao took control of Laos, leading to severe persecution of the Hmong and mass displacement. Many fled to Thailand as refugees, and thousands were later resettled in the United States, where the legacy of the Secret

1975, many Hmong refugees fled to Thailand, bringing with them strong anti-communist sentiments. Due to its proximity, particularly large numbers of refugees ended up in lowland areas of Northeastern Thailand across the Mekong River. This history of alignment with anti-communist forces made the Hmong both a target for Thai state surveillance and a community of interest for military and development programs aimed at integrating them into the nation.

In northeastern Thailand, the presence of communist insurgencies in the 1960s and 1970s led to intensified military campaigns and counterinsurgency measures. The Thai military viewed all ethnic minorities in the region as potentially sympathetic to communist ideology, particularly given their marginalization and grievances against the state.[271] As a result, military leaders

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War continues to shape Hmong identity and political memory. For more information, Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos* (Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000); Chia Youyee Vang, *Fly Until You Die: An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[271] The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) played a significant role in northeastern Thailand during the Cold War, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, when communist insurgencies posed a major challenge to the Thai state. Influenced by the broader spread of communist ideology in Southeast Asia, the CPT found support among marginalized groups in Isan, including rural farmers and ethnic minorities, who often faced economic hardship and political neglect. Many of these communities viewed the movement as a means to resist state oppression and advocate for social justice. The Thai military, fearing the expansion of communist influence, launched counterinsurgency campaigns, employing both military force and development initiatives to win over local populations. The monarchy also played a role in this effort, with King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit making frequent visits to the region to promote loyalty to the state. By the early 1980s, a combination of military pressure, government amnesty programs, and shifting geopolitical dynamics led to the decline of the CPT, with many former insurgents reintegrating into Thai society. However, the legacy of the movement persists in the region's political consciousness, reflecting ongoing tensions between the central government and the historically marginalized communities of northeastern Thailand. For more details, Ian G. Baird, "The Communist Party of Thailand's Education for Young Children in Northern Laos and Southern China," *South East Asia Research* 32, no. 3 (2024): 283–303.

established stronger bases in the northeast, launching development programs alongside military operations to counteract communist influence. Ethnic minorities, such as the Phu Thai and other Lao-speaking groups, were subject to state-led education, infrastructure development, and propaganda aimed at reinforcing their Thai national identity. The Cold War thus became a pivotal moment in the Thaification of the northeast, where ethnic diversity was subsumed under national unity to combat the perceived communist threat.

The Monarchy's connection to Buddhism was also central to its role in shaping regional identities. The royal patronage of the Sangha, the community of Buddhist monks, reinforced the idea of the king as the protector of the faith. This relationship was particularly important in Northern and Northeastern lowland Thailand, where Buddhism played a central role in everyday life. Through support for religious institutions, the monarchy not only promoted national unity but also fostered regional connections to the central state.[272] In Northeastern Thailand, where Theraveda Buddhism was deeply embedded, the monarchy's influence over the Sangha similarly helped to align regional identities with the national narrative, although Isan's cultural distinctiveness remained a point of divergence.

The Thai monarchy played a crucial role in shaping both national and regional identities throughout the country's history. Through its influence over key institutions, sponsoring of royal development projects, and promotion of nationalist policies, the monarchy served as both a unifying force and a driver of regional integration; however, the impact of the monarchy's initiatives have not been uniform across the country. Northern and northeastern Thailand maintained their distinct identities even as they were integrated into the broader national

[272] Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1971): 551–67.

framework. As the country continued to navigate the challenges of the twentieth century, the legacy of the monarchy's role in shaping Thailand's regional identities remained a key factor in understanding the nation's ongoing political and social dynamics.

After the return of the institution of the monarchy to the kingdom in the aftermath of WWII, the royal family played an essential role in shaping both regional and national identities across Thailand. While the North tended to embrace the monarchy's role more fully due to historical and cultural connections, the Northeast often maintained a more complicated relationship because of its unique socioeconomic and cultural differences. These regional variations reflect the broader challenges of nation building and assimilation in geographically and culturally diverse Thailand.

The passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 2016 marked the end of a reign that significantly influenced Thailand's modern identity. Over his 70-year reign, King Bhumibol not only solidified the monarch's role as a unifying institution but also laid the groundwork for national integration through a series of development projects intended to bridge regional and ethnic divides. His death highlighted the extent to which his leadership shaped modern Thailand, providing both stability and a sense of continuity in a rapidly modernizing nation. King Bhumibol's efforts to restore the monarchy's influence after its decline in the wake of the 1932 revolution were particularly evident in rural development. His initiatives in the Northern and Northeastern regions strove to foster a sense of unity among diverse ethnic groups by addressing socioeconomic disparities. His hands-on approach, including the promotion of agriculture, irrigation, and education, was crucial in integrating historically marginalized regions into the broader national framework.

The monarchy's role in shaping regional identities was further reinforced through its close connection to Buddhism. By supporting the Sangha and promoting religious unity, the monarchy strengthened its symbolic status as the protector of the faith among the low landers. In northern Thailand, royal sponsorship of temples and religious institutions helped align the region's identity with the central state, furthering the monarchy's vision of a unified, Buddhist nation. Similar efforts in the Isan region of the northeast, while important, often faced more complex challenges due to the region's distinct cultural and socioeconomic identity.

Through healthcare and infrastructure development in the highlands, the monarchy not only improved living conditions in marginalized areas but also played a crucial role in reinforcing the concept of Thainess among ethnic minorities who traditionally had weaker ties to the central state. Royal Projects, such as those led by Princess Srinagarindr, were essential in transforming remote, underdeveloped regions, particularly in the highlands of northern Thailand. These areas, historically isolated and economically disadvantaged, were targeted by the monarchy for initiatives that aligned development with national integration strategies.

Nation, Monarchy, and the Uneven Work of Integration

The distinction between highland and lowland minorities revealed a complex dynamic. Highland groups such as the Karen, Lahu, and Hmong received significant attention from the monarchy due to their geographical remoteness and their strategic importance during the Cold War. These regions were viewed as particularly susceptible to external influence from neighboring counties. The focus on highland development was not merely an act of benevolence, but a strategic political maneuver aimed at securing frontier regions and integrating them into the Thai nation-state. The monarchy's philanthropic projects—such as investments in healthcare, infrastructure, and education—functioned as both a stabilizing force and a tool for asserting

national authority in areas historically resistant to centralized rule. These efforts were disproportionately concentrated in highland areas, where geographic isolation and ethnic diversity made state penetration difficult, heightening fears that marginalized groups might align with insurgent or separatist movements. The frequency and cost of these interventions suggest that royal philanthropy operated as a calculated means of maintaining loyalty and mitigating political instability, much like a modernized tributary system in which resources were deployed to ensure deference rather than outright submission. Despite this sustained effort, the process of assimilating highland groups into the state's vision of Thainess remained incomplete, as cultural and geographic barriers continued to insulate these communities from full integration. In contrast to lowland regions, where the monarchy's influence was long established, highland philanthropy was a high cost but necessary investment to maintain national cohesion and avert political crisis.

In contrast, lowland minority groups, such as those in the Isan region, received less direct attention from royal development initiatives, not because they were less important, but because the state and monarchy saw them as more easily controlled through conventional mechanisms of governance. The monarchy's selective deployment of development projects was not incidental but a calculated strategy prioritizing areas where its influence was weaker and where national unity was most threatened. Isan's closer proximity to central Thailand meant that state institutions and economic structures naturally exerted a stronger influence over the population, reducing the need for overt royal intervention. Unlike the highlands, where royal philanthropy was used to manufacture loyalty and preempt separatist leanings, Isan's integration into the national framework relied more on state-driven administrative control and economic dependency. The absence of royal projects did not indicate neglect, but rather a strategic decision to let state mechanisms do the work of assimilation. While Isan communities were historically

resistant to central authority, their gradual incorporation into the national economic and political system ensured that Thainess became a dominant identity, not through direct royal engagement, but through the inexorable pull of state integration.

This disparity between highland and lowland highlights how geography and national identity are deeply intertwined. The geography of the highlands—isolated, rugged, and culturally diverse—slowed the process of Thaification, even as the monarchy intensified its efforts to integrate these frontier regions into the national fold. Meanwhile, the lowlands, though receiving less direct attention, were naturally more integrated into the nation due to their geographical location. In both cases, the geography of these regions played a decisive role in how effectively the national identity of Thainess was promoted and adopted. In the twentieth-century conception of the nation-state, which ties national identity to clearly demarcated boundaries, these efforts were seen as crucial to securing the integrity of the nation. As Benedict Anderson famously argued, nations are "imagined communities," constructed through shared symbols, institutions, and historical narratives—processes that were unevenly applied across Thailand's geographic and ethnic divides, necessitating a more forceful intervention in the highlands to ensure the monarchy's vision of national unity.[273] However, the result was a trade-off: while progress was achieved, the unique cultural identities of these regions were at risk of being eroded in favor of a more homogenized national identity.

As the monarchy reasserted itself as the symbolic and moral nucleus of Thai national identity between 1945 and 1980, its influence extended far beyond the spheres of politics, religion, and rural development. The Chakri dynasty, particularly through the initiatives of

[273] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 5-7.

Queen Sirikit and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, actively engaged in cultural diplomacy and preservation campaigns aimed at redefining national identity through everyday material culture. Traditional textiles, regional clothing, and artisanal crafts became powerful tools in this cultural project, serving not only as emblems of ethnic diversity but as curated symbols of a unified Thainess. This cultural politics of textiles, often framed as royal benevolence toward rural communities, masked deeper assimilationist intentions by selectively elevating certain regional traditions while marginalizing others. The monarchy's role in sponsoring and popularizing specific textile styles, particularly from the Northeastern Isan lowlands, while simultaneously commodifying highland ethnic motifs in national pageantry, reveals how cultural forms were mobilized to visually reinforce social hierarchies and national unity.

On October 13, 2016, the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) marked the end of a reign that lasted over 70 years, making him the longest-serving monarch in Thai history. His passing sent shockwaves throughout Thailand, not only because of the immense love and reverence the people had for him, but also because he symbolized a unifying force that transcended political, social, and regional divisions in the country. Throughout his reign, King Bhumibol served as a stabilizing figure who held the Thai state together during times of upheaval, such as political unrest, economic crises, and challenges to national unity.[274] His promotion of numerous development projects helped to forge a collective national identity that, in the twenty-first century, continues to resonate deeply across Thai society. His death highlighted just how integral the monarchy under his leadership had been in fostering a sense of unity in a rapidly modernizing and changing Thailand.

[274] Jason Woerner, *The Mourning of Rama IX* (PhD diss., Duke University, 2021).

To understand the impact of King Bhumibol's death on the Thai state, it is essential to reflect on the legacy he built after coming to power on June 9, 1946. Rama IX assumed the throne at a time of political instability when the monarchy's influence was waning after the 1932 revolution. He worked tirelessly to restore the monarchy's central role in Thai life. His initiatives, particularly those aimed at rural and underdeveloped regions of the country, fostered a strong connection between the people and the crown. Through royal development projects, agricultural programs, and his visible compassion for the well-being of the Thai people, King Bhumibol established the monarchy as a protector of the nation, thus becoming a symbol of hope and progress during the latter half of the twentieth century.[275]

These efforts were especially significant in northern and northeastern Thailand where the king's initiatives helped to bridge the gap between rural and urban populations, influencing the patterns of assimilation and regional identity formation between 1945 and 1980. King Bhumibol's reign thus not only unified Thailand in the contemporary period but also had a profound impact on the country's modernization and national integration during the years examined by this study, helping to shape regional identities and contributing to the nation's efforts to assimilate its diverse ethnic minorities.

As Thailand continued to evolve, the legacy of King Bhumibol's reign and the monarchy as an institution remained central to the nation's identity and its ongoing efforts to maintain unity amidst diversity. However, the dominance of Thainess as the primary framework for national belonging has often come at the expense of regional and ethnic identities, erasing linguistic,

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[275] Assumption University, "Royal Ties of Friendship" (Assumption University of Thailand), Accessed September 22, 2024 https://www.au.edu/news/royal-ties-of-friendship.html; "Passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej" *Bangkok Post,* Accessed September 22, 2024.

cultural, and social practices that once thrived in more autonomous spaces. State-driven assimilation policies have marginalized local traditions, pressured ethnic minorities to abandon their languages in favor of Thai, and reshaped historical narratives to fit a homogenized vision of the nation. The imposition of Thainess has not only diluted distinct cultural identities but has also deepened social inequalities, as groups that resist assimilation face economic and political marginalization. As national integration continues today, it is crucial to interrogate these legacies critically, ensuring that the pursuit of unity does not become a vehicle for cultural erasure and historical revisionism.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN VALLEYS AND MOUNTAINS: WRITING THAINESS, LIVING DIFFERENCE

This dissertation set out to investigate the uneven and contested processes of assimilation in Northern and Northeastern Thailand between 1945 and 1980, a period marked by state-led efforts to consolidate national identity in the face of regional diversity and Cold War pressures. Central to this inquiry was the question of how geography—particularly the distinction between highlands and lowlands—shaped both state policies and the lived experiences of ethnic minorities and refugee communities. By comparing the more accessible and integrated lowland regions with the rugged and marginalized highland zones, the research sought to uncover the ways in which space, ecology, and cultural proximity conditioned the outcomes of Thaification.[276]

Geography was not merely a physical backdrop but a central determinant of state strategies and local responses. In the lowlands, characterized by fertile river basins, dense settlement patterns, and longstanding connections to the political center of Bangkok, assimilation was both more forcefully pursued and more readily achieved. Populations such as the Isan Lao, Phu Thai, and Khon Muang were situated within landscapes that facilitated infrastructural development, educational expansion, and Buddhist institutional reach. Their cultural practices—including linguistic ties to the Tai-Kadai language family, Theravada Buddhism, and historical affiliations with premodern Thai polities—allowed for smoother incorporation into the national

[276] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 141–43.

narrative.[277] By contrast, the highlands presented both logistical and cultural challenges to assimilation. The mountainous terrain of the north and northwest limited state access slowed the spread of schools and roads, and made the establishment of permanent state institutions more difficult. Here, groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Lua retained considerable autonomy, sustaining distinct cultural practices and resisting full absorption into the state's vision of Thai identity.[278]

The question of geography also highlights the uneven application of state power. Lowland populations were seen as integral to the nation's fabric and were targeted for policies that emphasized rapid and direct assimilation into Central Thai norms. Highland populations, however, were often treated as peripheral, their integration framed in terms of security concerns rather than genuine cultural inclusion. State interventions—such as relocation programs, development schemes, and missionary activity—were designed as much to control highland populations as to assimilate them. These efforts frequently reinforced the perception of highlanders as outsiders, stigmatized as opium cultivators or potential insurgents, further deepening the cultural and political divide between the valleys and the mountains.[279]

At the same time, geography structured the agency of ethnic groups in negotiating their relations with the state. Lowland groups, positioned closer to centers of power, often adopted markers of Thai identity—such as the Thai language, Buddhist rituals, or symbols of royal

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[277] Charles F. Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 45–49.

[278] Boonchuay Sriwat, *Lua: The Forgotten People of Thailand* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1963), 19–21.

[279] Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1997), 84–85.

loyalty—as strategies for upward mobility and political security. Highland groups, while subject to state penetration, used their relative isolation to preserve linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions, or selectively adapted elements of Thai identity without abandoning their distinctiveness. The highlands thus became both spaces of resistance and frontiers of negotiation, where communities balanced the demands of national identity with the preservation of local ways of life.[280]

Revisiting this research question suggests the central conclusion of the dissertation: that geography was not an incidental factor but a structural determinant of how assimilation unfolded in post–World War II Thailand. The contrast between highland and lowland experiences demonstrates that national identity was never a uniform project. Instead, it was mediated through the ecological and cultural landscapes that shaped both the reach of the Thai state and the strategies of ethnic communities. By situating assimilation within this geographic framework, the dissertation provides a more nuanced understanding of Thainess—not as a monolithic identity imposed evenly across space, but as a contested and regionally differentiated process.[281]

Assimilation from Above, Adaption from Below

Institutions were the principal mechanisms through which the Thai state sought to mold diverse populations into a cohesive national identity. Education was perhaps the most direct and far-reaching of these tools. The 1960 National Education Plan and subsequent reforms expanded access to schools and standardized curricula across the country, embedding Thai language,

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[280] Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 112–15.

[281] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 130–34.

Buddhist morality, and loyalty to the monarchy at the core of instruction.[282] In the lowlands, these reforms found fertile ground, as schools were relatively easy to establish and local populations already shared cultural affinities with Central Thai norms. The result was a generation of Isan and northern lowland students who increasingly internalized Thainess as a naturalized identity. In the highlands, however, the same reforms often faltered. Ethnic groups such as the Hmong or Karen, with distinct languages and traditions, resisted standardized curricula that ignored their heritage, and logistical challenges meant that educational penetration was patchy at best. Rather than producing uniformity, the education system revealed the limitations of centralized assimilation when applied to diverse and geographically dispersed populations.[283]

Religion provided another potent avenue for assimilation, especially as Buddhism was enshrined as one of the three pillars of Thai nationalism alongside the monarchy and the nation. For Buddhist minorities in the lowlands, such as the Phu Thai of the Northeast, the state's religious initiatives often reinforced existing practices, allowing for a relatively seamless integration of local beliefs into the dominant Theravada framework. This was evident in the syncretic ways that spirit cults and animist traditions were absorbed into temple-centered Buddhism, aligning community life more closely with national identity.[284] In contrast, highland groups who practiced animism or Christianity faced more coercive forms of religious

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[282] Somchai Phongpaichit, *Education and Modernization in Thailand* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1976), 67–72.

[283] Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 156–58.

[284] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 55–61.

assimilation. Buddhist missionaries were dispatched to these regions, motivated not only by spiritual concerns, but also by geopolitical anxieties over Christian conversion and communist insurgency. Yet, as Charles Keyes has noted, the success of these missions was mixed, with many highland groups retaining distinctive religious practices.[285] Thus, religion facilitated integration in some regions while deepening cultural boundaries in others, illustrating again the uneven reach of Thaification.

The monarchy and material culture further reinforced assimilation through powerful symbols and everyday practices. King Bhumibol's development projects in the North and Northeast were designed to bind rural populations more closely to the nation through tangible improvements in livelihoods and a symbolic connection to the crown.[286] In lowland communities, these projects often succeeded in fostering loyalty to the monarchy and reinforcing the idea of the king as the protector of all Thais. In the highlands, however, royal initiatives struggled against both geography and entrenched cultural distinctiveness, limiting their effectiveness. These institutions reveal how the Thai state sought to engineer unity through schools, temples, the monarchy, and cultural symbols—but also how geography and culture mediated their success, producing a patchwork of inclusion and exclusion.

While state institutions sought to impose a uniform vision of Thainess, ethnic communities were far from passive recipients of these policies. In both highland and lowland regions, minorities strategically adopted, adapted, or resisted elements of national identity to

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[285] Charles F. Keyes, *Ethnic Identity in Thailand: The Dialectics of Assimilation and Diversity* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1997), 43–45.

[286] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Boom and Bust* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 29–30.

navigate opportunities and constraints. For lowland groups such as the Isan Lao and Phu Thai, adopting the Thai language, Buddhist rituals, and public displays of loyalty to the monarchy offered access to education, government services, and economic mobility.[287] These adaptations did not necessarily mean the abandonment of local culture; instead, many communities preserved regional dialects, ritual practices, and kinship networks alongside their adoption of national symbols. This selective appropriation demonstrates how minorities transformed Thaification from a top-down imposition into a negotiated process, in which cultural preservation and pragmatic assimilation could coexist.

Highland groups exercised agency differently, often leveraging their relative isolation to resist or reshape the pressures of assimilation. Communities such as the Hmong or Karen maintained linguistic distinctiveness and spiritual traditions even as they engaged with state development projects, missionary activity, or the education system. In some cases, they incorporated elements of Thainess—such as Buddhist practices or the use of Thai in trade—while retaining markers of ethnic identity in kinship rituals, dress, and oral traditions. Refugees from Indochina also demonstrated agency in complex ways: Vietnamese migrants in the Northeast, for example, adopted Theravada Buddhist practices and local language to integrate into Isan society, while Hmong refugees in the highlands relied on their transnational kinship networks and cultural resilience to maintain distinctiveness.[288] These examples reveal that ethnic communities were not passive objects of state power but active participants who reshaped

[287] Charles F. Keyes, *Ethnic Identity in Thailand*, 76–79.

[288] Mika Toyota, *Statelessness in the Thai-Burma Borderlands* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 91–94.

assimilation on their own terms, ensuring that Thainess remained a negotiated and contested identity rather than a monolithic one.

Comparative Synthesis: Lowlands Versus Highlands

In the lowlands of Northern and Northeastern Thailand, assimilation unfolded with greater speed and depth because of both geography and cultural familiarity with the state's identity markers. Communities such as the Isan Lao and Phu Thai were already enmeshed in Theravada Buddhist practices and shared linguistic ties with the Central Thai dialect, albeit in regional variations. Their proximity to Bangkok's political and administrative core made it easier for the state to extend infrastructure, education, and religious institutions into these areas. The 1960 National Education Plan was particularly effective here, standardizing Thai language instruction and reinforcing loyalty to the monarchy among Isan children who had previously been educated primarily in Lao dialects.[289] Similarly, Buddhist institutions provided a natural bridge, allowing local animistic practices to be incorporated into mainstream Theravada rituals without significant disruption to community life. These cultural and geographic conditions created fertile ground for Thaification, enabling the state to project its vision of Thai identity more successfully there than in other regions.

At the same time, lowland assimilation was not a simple process of erasure but one of transformation and selective inclusion. For example, the weaving traditions of Isan women, once viewed as regional cultural markers, were elevated into national symbols of Thai identity through state-sponsored promotion and royal patronage.[290] This symbolic incorporation both celebrated

[289] Somchai Phongpaichit, *Education and Modernization in Thailand*, 68–70.

[290] Susan Conway, *Thai Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 93–96.

and domesticated regional distinctiveness, transforming it into evidence of Thai unity. Similarly, the Khon Muang of the northern valleys, who had long maintained distinct Lanna cultural identities, were gradually repositioned as integral to the Thai nation through narratives that linked their past kingdoms to the Ayutthaya and Bangkok dynasties.[291] By the late twentieth century, these lowland groups were widely presented as "success stories" of assimilation—proof that regional difference could be harmonized into Thainess. Yet even within this narrative of success, local languages, identities, and loyalties endured, suggesting that the integration of the lowlands was both deep and incomplete.

The highlands, by contrast, remained zones of resistance, marked by geographical inaccessibility and deep cultural differences. Groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Lua lived in rugged mountain terrain that was difficult for the Thai state to penetrate, both physically and administratively. Highland livelihoods centered on swidden cultivation and ecological adaptation, which often clashed with state-led conservation policies and modern agricultural schemes.[292] Religious practices in the highlands further set these groups apart, with many adhering to animism or converting to Christianity under the influence of Western missionaries.[293] This divergence from lowland Theravada Buddhism placed them outside the state's religious and cultural framework, limiting the effectiveness of assimilation efforts. Their relative isolation

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[291] Charles F. Keyes, *Ethnic Identity in Thailand: The Dialectics of Assimilation and Diversity*, 41–44.

[292] Jonathan Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005), 77–79.

[293] Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*, 110–12.

allowed for the preservation of languages, oral traditions, and distinctive cultural practices well into the twentieth century, making them less susceptible to uniform Thaification.

Yet this persistence of cultural distinctiveness came at the cost of greater stigmatization and marginalization. During the Cold War era, highland groups were frequently portrayed as national security threats, associated with opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle or suspected of harboring communist insurgents.[294] The state's policies toward these communities often blurred the line between development and control: relocation schemes, counter-narcotics campaigns, and military surveillance reinforced their outsider status while attempting to fold them into the national framework. The result was a paradox: while the highlands were officially mapped within the Thai nation, their inhabitants were conceptually framed as "perpetual foreigners." This duality highlights the structural barriers that prevented highland groups from being fully absorbed into Thainess, underscoring the unevenness of assimilation across Thailand's diverse landscapes.

The divergence between lowland and highland experiences illustrates how geography functioned as both a physical and political boundary in shaping assimilation outcomes. In the fertile plains and valleys of the lowlands, geographic accessibility enabled the Thai state to project its institutions and narratives effectively, producing populations that could be celebrated as evidence of the success of Thaification. In the highlands, however, rugged terrain and cultural distance rendered these same efforts fragmentary and contested, perpetuating a discourse of otherness. This dynamic reflects Thongchai Winichakul's concept of the geo-body, where

[294] Martin J. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 123–26.

national space is not merely cartographic but also symbolic and hierarchical.[295] The lowlands were conceptualized as legitimate extensions of the Thai heartland, while the highlands—though mapped within the nation—remained ideologically outside the imagined community.

By situating assimilation within this geographic framework, the dissertation underscores the contingent nature of Thai national identity formation. The state's ability to impose its vision of Thainess was strongest where geography and culture aligned with its institutional power, but weakest where ecological, cultural, and political barriers persisted. This uneven geography of assimilation complicates linear narratives of national unification, revealing instead a mosaic of contested belonging that continues to shape Thailand's borderland politics today.

Institutions as Mechanisms of Thaification

The 1960 National Education Plan represented the state's most ambitious attempt to standardize and expand schooling across Thailand, embedding Thai language, Buddhist morality, and loyalty to the monarchy as central pillars of instruction. In the lowlands, the plan found success because schools could be easily established in accessible villages, and populations already shared cultural proximity with Central Thai norms. Lowland Lao-speaking communities, for instance, shifted gradually toward Thai-medium instruction, producing generations of students who internalized national narratives of unity and progress.[296] Education also became a powerful avenue of social mobility, as fluency in Thai and adherence to national ideals offered pathways into civil service, business, and military careers. In this sense, education served as both a mechanism of cultural homogenization and a tool for expanding access to national opportunity.

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[295] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 130–34.

[296] Phongpaichit, *Education and Modernization in Thailand*, 68-70.

In the highlands, however, the educational project encountered significant obstacles. Rugged terrain, limited infrastructure, and deeply rooted linguistic traditions made the standardized curriculum both difficult to implement and culturally alien. Highland groups such as the Hmong and Karen often resisted sending children to distant boarding schools where their languages and traditions were marginalized, and many saw schooling as a threat to local autonomy rather than a vehicle for advancement.[297] Moreover, the conflation of education with counterinsurgency during the Cold War meant that highland schools were sometimes viewed as tools of state surveillance rather than institutions of opportunity. The uneven reach of the 1960 reforms thus exposed the geographical and cultural limits of education as a tool of Thaification: while transformative in the lowlands, its effectiveness was muted and contested in the highlands.

Buddhism, long enshrined as one of the three pillars of Thai nationalism, provided another institutional mechanism through which the state sought to assimilate minority populations.[298] In the lowlands, Buddhist identity overlapped naturally with state initiatives, particularly for groups like the Phu Thai, who already practiced Theravada traditions. Local animist practices were often integrated into temple-centered Buddhism, producing a syncretic religious landscape that reinforced both community identity and national belonging.[299] The Sangha, tightly linked to the monarchy and state authority, acted as a conduit for state ideology, helping to align rural populations with the cultural and moral framework of Thainess. Religion in

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[297] Keyes, *Ethnic Identity in Thailand: The Dialectics of Assimilation and Diversity*, 56–58.

[298] Katherine Bowie, *Of Beggars and Buddhas: The Politics of Humor in the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 144–46.

[299] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, 55–61.

these contexts functioned as a bridge, smoothing the incorporation of local communities into the national fold.

In the highlands, however, Buddhism became less a bridge and more a barrier. Animist and Christian practices among groups such as the Hmong, Karen, and Lua set them apart from the Buddhist lowland majority, creating cultural distance from the state's nationalist narrative.[300] Buddhist missionaries were dispatched to these areas, motivated as much by anxieties over Christian proselytization and communist insurgency as by spiritual concerns. Yet these efforts often faltered: highland communities selectively adopted Buddhist practices while maintaining core elements of their indigenous or Christian faiths. Instead of producing religious uniformity, these initiatives underscored the cultural boundaries that differentiated highland communities from the national mainstream. Religion thus illustrates the asymmetry of Thaification: while it consolidated integration in the lowlands, it reinforced difference in the highlands.

Under King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), the monarchy reemerged as a central unifying institution, particularly through royal development projects launched from the 1950s onward. In the lowlands, these initiatives brought infrastructure, agricultural reform, and symbolic royal presence to communities that had long felt peripheral to the Bangkok-centered state. The king's visits to Isan villages and northern valley towns were carefully staged to demonstrate compassion, accessibility, and paternalistic authority, fostering loyalty to the monarchy as a protector of all Thais.[301] For many lowland minorities, these encounters deepened

[300] Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*, 162–64.

[301] Toyota, *Statelessness in the Thai-Burma Borderlands*, 82–85.

identification with the nation, as loyalty to the crown became synonymous with belonging to Thailand itself.

In the highlands, however, the monarchy's reach was far more limited. While royal projects were introduced to select highland areas, logistical challenges and entrenched cultural distinctiveness muted their impact. Highland groups often experienced development programs as intrusive, tied to state surveillance and counterinsurgency, rather than as genuine efforts at uplift. Moreover, the symbolic resonance of the monarchy was weaker in regions where communities maintained their own cultural and political traditions, and where the figure of the king remained distant both physically and ideologically.[302] The monarchy thus succeeded in deepening loyalty in the lowlands but struggled to overcome the cultural and geographic barriers of the highlands, again revealing the uneven reach of national assimilation.

Taken together, the institutions of education, religion, monarchy, and material culture reveal the central role of state structures in shaping the processes of assimilation. These institutions projected a vision of Thai identity rooted in Central Thai norms, elevating language, Theravada Buddhism, loyalty to the monarchy, and lowland cultural practices as markers of belonging. In the lowlands, where geography and cultural affinity facilitated their expansion, these institutions effectively drew populations into the orbit of Thainess.

In the highlands, however, these same institutions exposed the limits of state power. Schools, temples, and development projects struggled to penetrate remote communities, while textiles and cultural markers were appropriated in ways that underscored otherness rather than

[302] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 138–41.

integration.[303] Rather than producing uniformity, the institutional project of Thaification created uneven outcomes, with lowland minorities celebrated as "model Thais" and highlanders stigmatized as perpetual outsiders. This unevenness underscores the central argument of the dissertation: assimilation in Thailand was never a single, linear process, but a contested, regionally differentiated negotiation shaped by geography, institutions, and local agency.

Agency, Resistance, and Adaptation

Many ethnic minorities in both lowland and highland regions adopted Thai identity markers strategically, not as a wholesale embrace of assimilation but as a pragmatic response to social and economic pressures. In the lowlands, Isan Lao and Phu Thai families often encouraged children to learn Central Thai, adopt Thai surnames, and participate in Buddhist temple activities as pathways to education, employment, and eventual upward mobility.[304] These choices reflected a keen awareness that opportunities in the civil service, military, and urban labor markets were closely tied to the performance of Thainess. By adopting the visible and valued symbols of national identity, ethnic groups could navigate state structures that otherwise excluded or marginalized them.

Yet this adoption was not necessarily a sign of cultural loss. Instead, it often represented a calculated strategy to secure resources and security in a hierarchical national framework. Highland groups, though more isolated, also engaged in selective adoption, particularly when interacting with lowland markets, state officials, or development programs. For instance, Karen villagers might use Thai in official dealings or participate in Buddhist rituals during state

[303] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 324–26.

[304] Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand*, 45–49.

ceremonies, even while retaining distinct dress, language, and kinship structures in their daily lives.[305] In this way, Thai identity markers became tools of negotiation—resources that communities could deploy in specific contexts without fully abandoning their ethnic identities.

Despite adopting certain Thai markers, ethnic groups simultaneously maintained key aspects of their distinctiveness, often as acts of subtle or overt resistance. In the Northeast, Isan communities continued to use the Lao dialect in households and local rituals, ensuring its survival alongside Central Thai.[306] Similarly, highland groups like the Hmong and Lua maintained oral traditions, clan-based governance, and animist or Christian spiritual practices that resisted full incorporation into the Thai Buddhist-nationalist framework.[307] These practices were not merely cultural remnants but conscious acts of preservation, signaling the limits of state power and the resilience of ethnic identity.

The maintenance of distinctiveness also provided a form of collective solidarity in the face of assimilation pressures. By sustaining their own languages, rituals, and social institutions, ethnic communities could resist the homogenizing narrative of Thainess while asserting their place within Thailand's plural landscape. In some cases, these forms of resistance were quiet and localized, embedded in family life and village rituals; in others, they took the form of open opposition, such as when highland communities resisted relocation schemes or missionary

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[305] Toyota, *Statelessness in the Thai-Burma Borderlands*, 82–83.

[306] Keyes, *Ethnic Identity in Thailand: The Dialectics of Assimilation and Diversity*, 62–64.

[307] Don McCaskill, *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1997), 187–90.

efforts.[308] The persistence of ethnic distinctiveness across both highland and lowland regions demonstrates that assimilation was not simply a one-way process of cultural erasure, but an ongoing negotiation between state demands and community resilience.

For many groups, the tension between adoption and resistance produced hybrid cultural practices that blended elements of Thainess with local traditions. The Phu Thai of the Northeast provide a striking example: while they embraced Theravada Buddhism as promoted by the Thai Sangha, they also retained animist rituals and spirit cults, weaving them into Buddhist practice.[309] This syncretism allowed them to participate in the national religious framework while preserving their own spiritual heritage, demonstrating a dynamic and creative engagement with Thaification. Highland groups, too, engaged in hybridity, incorporating selective Buddhist symbols into animist or Christian frameworks while maintaining their distinctive cosmologies.[310]

Such hybrid practices reveal that assimilation was never absolute but always mediated by local creativity and agency. Rather than being fully absorbed into Central Thai norms, ethnic groups often redefined what Thainess meant on their own terms, producing cultural forms that were at once national and local. These practices complicate simplistic dichotomies of assimilation versus resistance, showing instead a spectrum of negotiated identities that allowed communities to survive within the nation-state while asserting cultural autonomy. Hybridity,

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[308] Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between*, 101–4.

[309] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 59–61.

[310] Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia,* 117–19.

therefore, stands as evidence of ethnic ingenuity in transforming state-imposed narratives into locally meaningful practices.

Taken together, the patterns of selective adoption, cultural maintenance, and hybrid practices demonstrate that assimilation in mid-twentieth-century Thailand was not a top-down imposition but a dynamic process of negotiation. The Thai state deployed institutions and policies to promote uniformity, but local communities consistently reshaped these efforts through strategies of adaptation, preservation, and creative blending. This agency reveals that ethnic minorities were active participants in the making of Thainess, even when their choices were constrained by structural inequalities and political pressures.

By reframing assimilation as a negotiated process, this study challenges linear narratives of Thaification as a story of state dominance. Instead, it highlights the mutual entanglements of power and resistance, showing how Thai national identity was shaped not only by institutions in Bangkok but also by the everyday decisions of villagers in Isan, Karen settlements in the highlands, and Vietnamese refugee camps in the Northeast.[311] These negotiations underscore the contested and uneven nature of Thai nation-building, revealing a national identity that was never monolithic but instead continually remade in the interaction between state authority and local agency.

Implications for Thai and Southeast Asian History

Thailand's experience demonstrates the paradox of state-led nation-building in multi-ethnic societies: assimilation was highly successful in the lowlands but came at the cost of deepening the marginalization of highlanders. Through education, Buddhism, the monarchy, and

[311] Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 142–45.

material culture, the Thai state managed to incorporate Isan Lao, Phu Thai, and Khon Muang communities into the national framework, producing a widely celebrated image of successful Thaification. Yet this success was selective. Highland groups such as the Hmong, Karen, and Lua were framed as perpetual outsiders, excluded from the symbols and institutions that defined Thainess. This uneven outcome illustrates that integration was less about universal belonging than about creating hierarchies of inclusion, in which certain populations were embraced as part of the nation while others were tolerated or controlled at its margins.[312]

The selective nature of Thai assimilation highlights the contradictions of national identity projects more broadly. The state achieved cohesion by absorbing populations with cultural and geographic proximity, while simultaneously reinforcing boundaries that excluded those deemed too different or inaccessible. This produced what Charles Keyes has described as the dialectics of assimilation and diversity: a process that simultaneously erases and preserves difference.[313] In Thailand, this meant that national unity rested on the careful balancing of inclusion and exclusion, revealing both the possibilities and limits of state-led cultural engineering.

Thailand's selective integration resonates strongly with broader patterns in Southeast Asia, where governments confronted similar challenges of managing ethnic diversity in the aftermath of colonialism and during the Cold War. In Burma/Myanmar, successive regimes sought to consolidate Burman Buddhist dominance while marginalizing upland groups such as the Karen, Kachin, and Shan, producing decades of armed conflict.[314] In Vietnam and Laos,

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[312] Boonchuay Sriwat, *Lua: The Forgotten People of Thailand*, 19-21.

[313] Keyes, *Ethnic Identity in Thailand: The Dialectics of Assimilation and Diversity*, 43-45.

[314] Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 84-85.

highland minorities like the Hmong and Montagnards were alternately courted and controlled, often framed as security risks in a period of intense regional conflict. Malaysia provides yet another parallel: while Malay identity was elevated as the foundation of the nation, Chinese and Indian communities were incorporated under conditions of structural inequality, producing a carefully managed but fragile pluralism.[315] These cases suggest that Thailand's balancing of unity and diversity was part of a wider regional struggle to forge national cohesion in ethnically complex societies.

By placing Thailand in dialogue with its neighbors, it becomes clear that assimilation policies were never simply cultural projects but also deeply political, tied to issues of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Cold War geopolitics. Each state selectively integrated groups that could be incorporated with relative ease, while marginalizing those who were either geographically isolated or politically inconvenient. This regional comparison underscores the importance of viewing Thai nation-building not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of a Southeast Asian pattern of uneven assimilation, shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures.

The legacies of Thailand's selective assimilation are visible today in the persistence of statelessness, refugee crises, and ethnic tensions along the country's borders. Thousands of highlanders, particularly Hmong and Karen, remain without formal citizenship, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and political rights.[316] Refugees from Myanmar continue to cross into Thailand, where they face both humanitarian assistance and systemic suspicion, reflecting

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[315] A.B. Shamsul, *From British to Bumiputera Rule: Local Politics and Rural Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986).

[316] Toyota, *Statelessness in the Thai-Burma Borderlands*, 91-94

long-standing narratives that cast borderland populations as security threats. The Wa, Karen, and Burmese refugee crises of the twenty-first century are not aberrations but continuations of historical patterns of marginalization and selective incorporation that this dissertation has traced from 1945 to 1980.

These legacies underscore the enduring fragility of Thai national identity. While the lowlands remain integrated into the national framework, the unresolved tensions in the highlands and borderlands highlight the incomplete nature of assimilation. Moreover, the rise of transnational ethnic politics, humanitarian advocacy, and global migration pressures means that Thailand's management of diversity remains under scrutiny. As recent incidents of violence in border provinces remind us, the politics of inclusion and exclusion continue to shape both Thailand's domestic stability and its regional role. Addressing these contemporary challenges requires confronting the historical roots of marginalization and reimagining national identity in ways that move beyond the selective assimilation of the past.[317]

An Unfinished Nation: Making and Unmaking Thainess

The findings of this dissertation also invite us to think forward. After 1980, Thailand entered a new era of globalization, regional integration, and rapid economic change.[318] These shifts opened up new spaces for minorities to assert their identities, whether through NGO networks, education, or cross-border migration. At the same time, old tensions persisted: highlanders without citizenship, Karen refugees fleeing conflicts in Myanmar, and Wa communities caught in the shadows of regional geopolitics. The story of Thai assimilation, then,

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[317] Human Rights Watch, *"Two Years With No Moon": Ethnic Karen Women's Struggle for Justice in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2012).

[318] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Boom and Bust*, 44–47.

is not frozen in the past. It continues to echo in twenty-first century struggles over borders, citizenship, and belonging.

Future research can buildthe this study in several directions. First, by exploring post-1980 transformations, we can see how global frameworks like ASEAN or discourses of multiculturalism complicate Thailand's traditional assimilation model. Second, comparative work across Southeast Asia, whether in Myanmar's protracted ethnic insurgencies, Malaysia's fragile pluralism, or Vietnam's treatment of its highland minorities, can situate Thailand in a broader conversation about the promises and perils of national integration.[319] Finally, transnational ethnic politics, from refugee advocacy networks to diaspora activism, open up new questions about what it means to belong in an era when identities and allegiances increasingly stretch across state borders.

In the end, this dissertation has argued that the making of Thai national identity was never as simple as state narratives would have us believe. It was, and remains, an uneven and fragile project, one that created unity in some places and alienation in others. To recognize this complexity is not to weaken the idea of Thainess but to understand it more honestly: as a process always in motion, contested and reimagined by those who live it. National identity, in Thailand as elsewhere, is never complete. It is always being made, and remade, in the negotiations between power, place, and people.

This project is not only an academic inquiry but also a deeply personal reckoning. Written from the perspective of a Thai American of both Phu Thai and Lao Isan heritage, it reflects a lived awareness of how Thaification reshaped identity in the lowlands, where cultural

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[319] Shamsul, *From British to Bumiputera Rule: Local Politics and Rural Development in Peninsular Malaysia*, 63–70.

proximity allowed for smoother incorporation into the national fold. Yet the act of writing from the highlands highlighted another reality: that for many communities, assimilation was not subtle but fraught, experienced as marginalization and exclusion rather than recognition. The work acknowledges that the author's own familial pathways into Thai identity were made possible by historical closeness to the state, even as others remained marked as perpetual outsiders. This history, therefore, is not simply a matter of scholarly choice but of necessity. If such uneven stories of belonging, of those in the valleys who became exemplars of Thainess and those in the mountains who resisted or were left behind, are not told by those positioned between these worlds, then they risk being silenced altogether. The stakes are not only historical but moral: to affirm that the nation is never a finished product, and that the silences and exclusions of its making must be named, even, and especially, by those who embody its contradictions.

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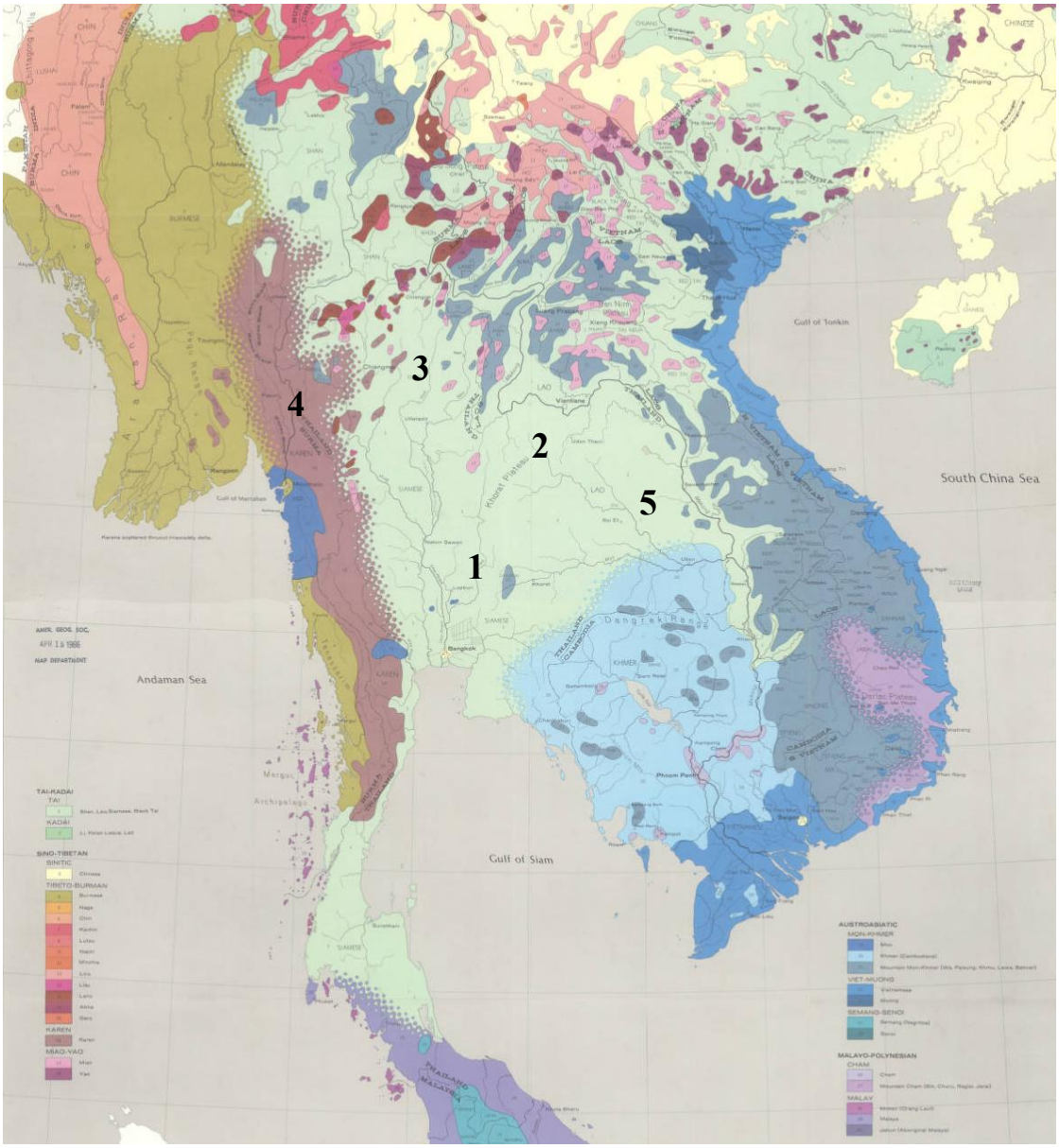
APPENDIX A: ETHNIC MAP OF SOUTHEAST ASIA



Map A1: Ethnolinguistic Map of Southeast Asia

The numbered regions (1-5) on the map corresponds to specific ethnic group in Thailand. Source: Frank M. LeBar, Gerald C. Hickey, John K. Musgrave; Robert Lee Williams, "Ethnolinguistic groups of mainland Southeast Asia," 1964, American Geographical Society Library Digital Map Collection, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries.

Akha (3)

A highland ethnic group predominantly residing in northern Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and China. Known for their distinct headdresses and strong oral traditions, the Akha have

historically maintained semi-autonomous village structures but have faced pressures from assimilation policies.

Hmong (2 and 3)

An ethnic group with roots in southern China, the Hmong migrated into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. In Thailand, they are primarily found in the northern highlands, where they have practiced shifting cultivation.[320] The Hmong played a complex role during the Indochina Wars and have often been subject to state intervention.

Hmong Refugees (2 and 3)

Refers to Hmong communities who fled Laos following the Vietnam War and the rise of the communist Pathet Lao government. Many Hmong refugees settled in northern Thailand, where they were placed in camps before either resettling abroad or integrating into Thai society. Their status as refugees often led to limited citizenship rights and socioeconomic marginalization.

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[320] Shifting cultivation, often referred to as swidden agriculture, is a traditional farming system widely practiced in Southeast Asia, particularly in upland and forested regions, in which farmers clear a small plot of land—typically through cutting and controlled burning—cultivate it for a short period, and then allow it to lie fallow so soil fertility and forest cover can regenerate naturally. In Thailand, this system has historically been central to the livelihoods of highland ethnic groups such as the Karen, Hmong, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu, functioning not only as an economic strategy but also as part of a broader ecological and spiritual relationship with the landscape. From the mid-twentieth century onward, however, the Thai state increasingly redefined shifting cultivation as environmentally destructive and associated it with deforestation, opium production, and security threats, particularly during the Cold War. As a result, swidden agriculture became a key target of state-led development, conservation, and assimilation policies, contributing to the marginalization of highland communities and the restructuring of their relationships with land and citizenship. Jefferson Fox et al., "Shifting Cultivation: A New Old Paradigm for Managing Tropical Forests," *BioScience* 50, no. 6 (2000): 521–528; Jonathan Rigg, *More Than the Soil: Rural Change in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Karen (3 and 4)

One of the largest highland ethnic groups in Thailand, with subgroups such as the Sgaw and Pwo Karen. Many Karen communities are Christian, while others practice Buddhism or animism. They have historically maintained close ties with Burmese and Thai societies, with a long history of political movements for autonomy.

Lahu (3)

A highland ethnic group mainly found in northern Thailand, Myanmar, and China. The Lahu are known for their agricultural traditions and animist beliefs, though Christian missionary efforts have influenced many communities. They have a history of resistance against state control.

Lisu (3)

An ethnic group with origins in Tibet and southwestern China, the Lisu settled in northern Thailand and Myanmar. They are known for their colorful clothing and diverse religious practices, including Christianity, Buddhism, and animism.

Lua (Lawa) (3-4)

One of the oldest indigenous groups in northern Thailand, the Lua (Lawa) predate the arrival of the Tai peoples. Historically residing in the mountains, they have maintained a distinct cultural identity despite pressures from Thai national integration policies.

Mon (1)

An ethnic group with a deep historical presence in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. The Mon were instrumental in the early spread of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia. While their distinct identity has been largely assimilated into Thai and Burmese societies, Mon communities still exist in central and western Thailand.

Phu Thai (2-5)

An ethnic group concentrated in northeastern Thailand, the Phu Thai have historically practiced wet-rice agriculture and maintained strong Buddhist traditions while integrating into the broader Isan identity within Thailand.

Shan (Tai Yai) (3-4)

An ethnic group primarily residing in Myanmar's Shan State but with significant populations in northern Thailand, the Shan share linguistic and cultural similarities with the Thai but have retained distinct traditions and political aspirations, including historical resistance against Burmese rule.

Tai Lue (3)

A Tai-speaking ethnic group from southern China, Laos, and northern Thailand. The Tai Lue are known for their unique textile traditions and Buddhist practices. Many settled in Thailand as a result of migration and displacement.

Thai Isan (2)

Refers to the ethnically Lao-speaking population of northeastern Thailand (Isan). Although culturally and linguistically linked to Laos, Thai Isan people have been integrated into Thai society through education and political policies, especially during the 20th-century Thaification process.

Thai Lanna (3)

Refers to the ethnic Thai people of Northern Thailand, particularly from the historical Lanna Kingdom (1292–1775). Thai Lanna culture is distinct from central Thai traditions, with its own dialect (Kam Mueang), architectural style, and religious practices. While integrated into the

Thai nation-state, Lanna identity remains strong in northern provinces like Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lampang.

Vietnamese (Thai-Viet) (3)

A Vietnamese diaspora group in Thailand, mainly in northeastern regions. Many fled Vietnam during the colonial and post-colonial conflicts. The Thai state encouraged their assimilation, though some communities have maintained their cultural and religious traditions, including Catholicism.

Vietnamese Refugees (3)

Refers to Vietnamese individuals who fled to Thailand due to conflicts in Indochina, particularly during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Many were placed in refugee camps along the Thai-Lao and Thai-Cambodian borders. Some integrated into Thai society, particularly in Isan, while others were resettled in third countries. Their presence influenced local economies and cultural landscapes.

APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY OF REGIONS AND PROVINCES

This glossary provides definitions and descriptions of the regions and provinces referenced in the study on ethnic identity and Thai-ness in Highland and Lowland Thailand (1945–1980), including whether highland areas exist within them.

Northern Thailand

A mountainous region historically associated with the Lanna Kingdom. It contains highland areas inhabited by ethnic groups such as the Hmong, Karen, Lahu, and Lisu, alongside lowland Thai populations.

Chiang Mai (Highland & Lowland): Former capital of the Lanna Kingdom, a center for highland minority communities and royal development projects.

Chiang Rai (Highland & Lowland): Known for its diverse ethnic population, including Akha, Hmong, and Tai Lue communities.

Lampang (Lowland): A historically significant province in Lanna, with a mix of Thai Lanna and minority populations.

Mae Hong Son (Highland): A remote province with a high concentration of Shan, Karen, and other highland groups.

Nan (Highland & Lowland): A province with a history of relative autonomy, home to the Tai Lue and Hmong.

Phayao (Highland & Lowland): Once part of the Lanna Kingdom, it has a Thai Lanna majority but some highland influence.

Phrae (Highland & Lowland): Historically tied to the teak industry, with a mix of Thai Lanna and ethnic minority influences.

Tak (Highland & Lowland): Home to both highland Karen communities and Thai lowland settlements.

Northeastern Thailand (Isan)

A plateau region bordering Laos and Cambodia, characterized by a strong Lao cultural influence. Primarily lowland, with some highland areas along its western and northern edges.

Udon Thani (Lowland) – A major city with a large Vietnamese-Thai population.

Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) (Lowland) – A transitional province between central and northeastern Thailand, historically significant for Thai state expansion.

Khon Kaen (Lowland) – A key educational and economic center in Isan, known for its role in national development programs.

Sakon Nakhon (Lowland) – Notable for its Vietnamese refugee population and strong Buddhist traditions.

Mukdahan (Lowland) – A border province with Lao cultural influence.

Loei (Highland & Lowland) – A province with a mix of lowland Thai and highland ethnic communities such as the Hmong.

Buriram (Lowland) – Home to Khmer cultural influences and significant historical sites.

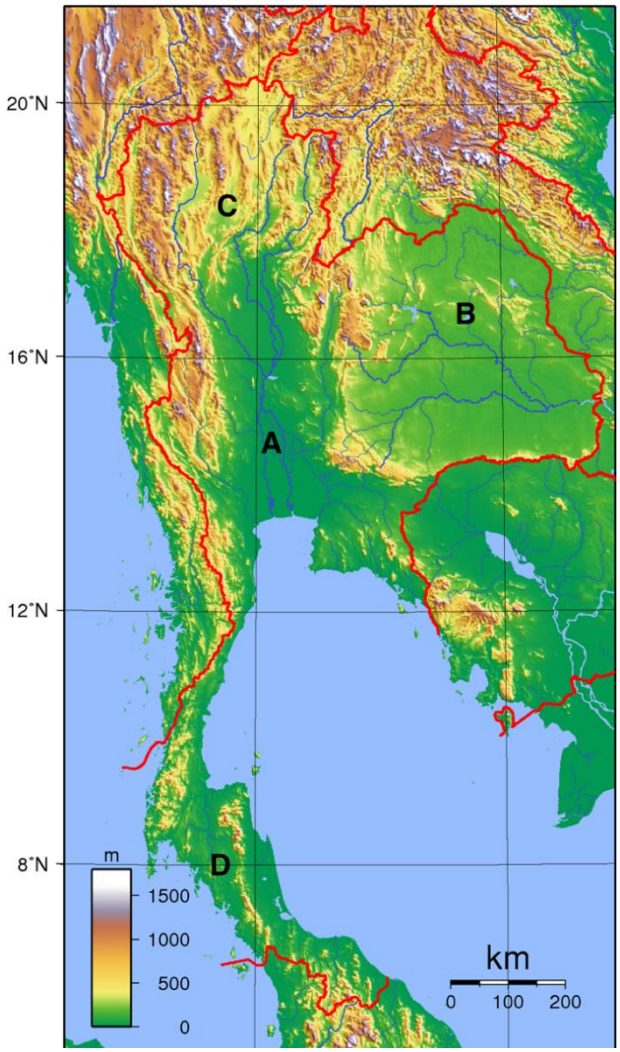
Central Thailand

The political and economic heart of Thailand, home to the capital and the dominant Thai cultural identity. Predominantly lowland with fertile plains.

Bangkok (Lowland) – The capital and political center, historically influencing Thai national identity and assimilation policies.

Ayutthaya (Lowland) – The former Siamese capital, central to Thai state-building and historical narratives.

APPENDIX C: TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP OF THAILAND



Appendix Map C1: Topographical Map of Thailand

Lowland is in the green zone. Highland in the red/brown/white zone. Source: Sadalmelik, Topographic Map of Thailand. Created with GMT from publicly released GLOBE data.

A = Central Lowland

B = Northeastern (Isan) region; comprised of mostly Lowland and highland in one province, Loei

C = Northern (Lanna) region; comprised of mostly highland and lowland around city centers occupied by Thai Lanna

D = Southern region; not the subject of research in this dissertation. Comprise of both lowland and highland and occupied by ethnic groups like Thai, Chinese, and Malay.

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